A RIDICULOUS NOVEL

Fools in Love

it all begins with a Gucci shirt

TWOONY

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1. Shoelaces of DOOM!

Dana has a stutter. People have stutters. People can get stutters when upset, angry, or overwhelmed. Do not make fun of his stutter. I am great friends with the block button.

A hush falls over the food court.

I reach for my glasses, regretting regaining my sight immediately. All eyes are on me, the dumbass laying face first on the floor after tripping over his untied shoelaces. That shouldn't be too bad though, right? It happens, some people will laugh but, y'see, a moment ago I had a tray full of food. Now I don't.

Where did the food go, you my ask? Well...

"Oh my god, Matt, are you ok?!"

"Matt, you're completely covered! Do you need me to run you to the store?"

"What idiot still trips over his shoelaces?"

"How is he going to pay for Matt's clothes? They probably cost more than our college tuition."

I would feel bad, except they're right. I am all kinds of doomed.

Looking up, I stare into the cold blue eyes of Matthew Jeneviere. Even his name has a nice ring to it, fitting for the young superstar. And that should be enough to give one a good description of his appearance; picturesque. Even when covered in my lunch he looks like a model, chiseled cheeks, thin eyes, tousled brown hair, shoulders wide enough to carry a truck and the height many would kill for while wearing a Gucci shirt...that I just dumped my entire lunch on. In front of the entire food court.

"What are you doing? Apologize!" One of the many girls that follows Matt like he's the next Messiah hollers at me with a scowl. Others are mimicking her expression.

What?! It's not like I did it on purpose. I—geesh—they're looking at me like I just kicked their cat.

Still, I rush to grab my dropped tray then scurry to my feet. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Matt, I c-can...pa-pa-pay y-you back?"

Damn stutter. I was teased like hell for it in elementary school and it always comes back with a vengeance when in times of stress.

Matt's bodyguard, whose name I have never heard, follows him everywhere; a man that looks to be in his early thirties with short black hair and brown eyes. He's shaking his head with a smirk while Matt remains motionless in his seat, eyes narrowed on me. I wish he'd at least scowl. The blank expression he's wearing makes this even worse!

"It's fine," Matt says in a monotone voice that has those around him in an uproar.

"It's not fine! He completely ruined your clothes!"

"Dude, he should pay you back."

Matt grabs his backpack to toss over his shoulder. All watch in a mixture of terrified fascination when the boy stands, looking like he's getting ready for a movie shoot rather than simply getting up to leave. Without a word, he walks away, a few of his "gang" following along behind muttering all kinds of nonsense while I'm left wondering if I'm going to be receiving a very expensive bill.

Shit, what am I going to do?

Suddenly, there's an arm around my shoulder. I jump in shock, finding my new friend and roommate, Tori. He reminds me of a fox with his crazy black hair and constant sly smirk. He's the type to get into trouble, the type I

avoided in high school but now find myself rooming with in the dorms. Not that I mind, he's been nice to me so far.

Tori is grinning from ear to ear when he says, "Not to be a dick, but that was the best thing I've seen in my whole life. Thank you, Dana."

I groan and angrily ruffle my mess of red hair. Why me?! Why Matt of all people?! I can't pay him back. I already don't have money!

"Idiot Spills Lunch on *THE* Matthew Jeneviere, look, it's already online."

"What?!" I scream, grabbing the phone Tori is waving in my face. Sure enough, our school is tagged in a tweet about my dumbass spilling food on Matt. The votes and comments are coming in like crazy and, only a second later, a link to YouTube is posted. "I'm so dead."

"Absolutely."

"This isn't funny."

"True, true." Tori pats my back with a smile. "It's fucking hilarious."

"Tori—"

"If you meet up with him again to beg for mercy, could you ask for his autograph for me?"

"Tori!"

"I bet it'd sell real good online." Tori actually starts to investigate how much Matt's autograph goes for. I roll my eyes and stomp off, ignoring my growling stomach because how can I eat during a time like this?! I can't buy anything again for years in order to pay Matt back for that stupid Gucci shirt!

"Hey, Dana, wait up!"

I walk faster, keeping my head down from all the amused eyes and snickers. It's not even safe outside the food court. Students are already checking their

phones finding the video that will spread like wildfire.

Why? Why?!

College was meant to be different. Growing up being teased for every possible thing; my name, my glasses, my freckles, my height, all of it has been looming over my head for as long as I can remember. I've been the loser, the outcast, the shy one that blended into the background or the nerd that was shoved in a locker my whole life. But times have changed. I'm not in that small town school anymore where I can't escape my past. I'm in college, away from old classmates and capable of rebranding myself.

During high school I worked my ass off, applied to a good college and moved in hopes to start a new life and I accomplished that. I got into college. I moved into the dorms. I started making friends, like Tori (even if in this instance he's being a jerk), but now I've gone and messed it up. Is this the world telling me that I can never change? What kind of messed up fate is this? I want a replacement!

What celebrity goes to college nowadays anyways? Don't they buy their way into places like Harvard or stick to online schooling?

Because of Matt the campus has been in a complete uproar! I've seen him in plenty of magazines and commercials the last few years, but he's best known for his dramas and movies. Once I actually picked one up, some soapy romance that I thought would be awful, especially with Matt's constant apathetic expressions and monotone voice. Except the movie actually moved me to tears and Matt was such a great actor that I seriously couldn't believe it was him.

How did the boy that cried and laughed so realistically on camera turn into a statue in real life?

Students from all walks of life are attempting to befriend the quiet freshman. There's always a group around him and you know when he's nearby because you can see the fans and hear them kissing ass. From what I heard through the gossip (which I hate listening to, but I am never in the loop with celebrities so it's all I got), Matt took two years off, practically

dropped off the map until he appeared at school a week ago. The guy has made for great headlines and there's paparazzi scurrying around town constantly in hopes for a scoop.

My blunder becomes their next scoop because, sure enough, I wake Tuesday morning with every intention to live my perfectly normal life only to be assaulted by reality. More specifically Tori's phone in my face with that YouTube video pulled up to show the views are in the millions.

"Hah?!"

"That's not all." Tori clicks through his phone showing me that there are news articles, repostings, meme's and even reddit threads. Some not so nice people have left some not so nice comments about me, the supposed jerk that apparently spilled the food on purpose.

"On purpose? Why would I do that on purpose?!"

I'm going to cry. I'm going to cry until I drop dead of dehydration. That is way better than this. What did I do in a past life to deserve this?

Groaning, I fall into bed, flailing about like a fish out of water. Tori is sitting on the edge of said bed, shrugging his shoulders while kicking his feet happily. "Says here you are an anti fan that wanted to make Matt look bad. I think you are going to need a bodyguard more than anyone else."

A...what?

I sit up fast, grabbing Tori by the arm when I do so. He looks me up and down curiously, wondering why I'm staring at him like a mad man until I ask, "You don't think some crazy fans will jump me, do you?"

"I don't know about jump, maybe chase and beat, but I don't think they'd jump."

"Do you take anything seriously?"

"Dana, how can I take this seriously? It's the most ridiculous thing that has ever happened, but somehow, I'm not surprised it's you."

"Thanks for the support."

"You're welcome!" Tori pushes me back in order to stand. Stretching his arms high above his head, the boy yawns and says, "Get ready for class. At least I'll be walking with you to math, but you may want to look into getting some help from campus security later."

"Shut up."

Laughing like a hyena, Tori walks away, leaving me to wallow in my misery.

What am I meant to do now? My college life has ended before it even began. And here I was doing so well! I've even been invited to my first ever party this weekend, only because Tori was invited thus he invited me, but still. Now I wonder if I should go. Parties have never been my thing but I'm trying to find my "new" thing. I don't want to be the same Dana as I was in high school. This was meant to be my chance!

But some untied shoelaces had to go and ruin it.

~

Story is Complete.

Hi, please do not refer to my characters as sex positions; top, bottom, uke, seme etc. They have names. Use them. They aren't toys ^_^ Please respect my request here and on my other stories, thank you. Dana is a guy, for those that somehow missed that. Welcome to my story that if you are expecting anything grand from, stop now lol I wanted to make it pretty ridiculous, fun and silly, a lighthearted read for funsies. Enjoy!

2. Lady Luck Can Suck It

I'm going to puke.

Walking around campus, the only reaction I get are pointed whispers. Heads are turning my way, snickering beneath their breath, but at least I haven't been attacked yet. Maybe that's because Tori is at my side heading for our first class of the day. Sadly, we share that math class with Matt so the moment we step into the room I am met with yet another hush.

The students sitting tiredly at desks suddenly awake upon seeing me. My stomach has dropped. My body is shaking. I think I'm going to faint. Tori starts pushing me from behind to get us to our desks. Unlike him, who is smiling like an idiot, I'm shaking like a leaf with a huge frown and Matt isn't even here yet!

"What-what should I say to him?" I ask Tori when we both take our seats.

"Don't say anything."

"That makes me seem like I don't want to pay—"

"You don't, though?"

"I should. I ruined the shirt."

"Bullshit. He can take it to the cleaners or buy a new one. He has money spewing out of his ass."

That's not the point! Just because he has a lot of money doesn't mean no one should pay him should they ruin something he owns. If someone rear ends his car, should he pay for the damage? Obviously not! And I don't want to be that jerk who won't pay up. I, uh, I'm sure I can ask to do monthly installments...right?

I slam my head against the desk.

Please don't show up today. Maybe everything will calm down if he doesn't show up for just one—

"Good morning, Matt!"

"Hey Matt, what's up?"

Damn it.

Slowly raising my head, I find Matt entering the room without so much as acknowledging anyone; myself included. As happy as that makes me, I know that at some point I'll have to speak with him.

Matt takes a seat near the front of the room. He removes his headphones to sit around his neck, some expensive brand that's probably as sound proof as they get. Immediately the desks around him are filled with students chattering away. I hear many asking when Matt plans to ask for the money. They look over their shoulders towards me, some appearing sympathetic and others simply enjoying the drama. However, Matt never answers the question and never gives me so much as a glance, not once throughout the entire class.

By the end, with his backpack and notebook in hand, he leaves without a glance too. Even his fanatics are shocked that he left, scattering like roaches to quickly get their own belongings and follow him.

"Heh, I'm starting to think he really isn't going to ask you to pay him back," says Tori with a nod. He's shoving a notebook into his bag, standing while throwing it over his shoulder. "That's awesome. If he doesn't ask then you shouldn't bring it up, seriously."

"But—"

"If he isn't asking then it's probably because he knows, unlike him, we're a bunch of broke ass college students. I think he'd look like a jackass to ask for the money."

I bite my lip.

Could that really be the reason? I'm uncertain and, seeing as I have no way to contact him other than randomly running into him on campus, there's no quick way to find out. We won't see each other again until Thursday where we share math and our freshman seminar. By then maybe I can figure out what to say to him, if I can even meet with him alone, which I highly doubt. His mob may actually jump me if I even tried.

"Oh, you're still coming to the party Friday night, right?" Tori asks.

I nod "Yeah."

"You work Friday morning though, sure you'll be ok?"

"I'll take a nap before."

"Cool." Tori pats my shoulder with his signature wide grin. "Hopefully you'll survive the day."

I frown and Tori walks away laughing towards his next class, which he sadly doesn't share with me. The moment he's gone I feel a thousand times worse. It's easier to walk around campus with someone, but now that I'm on my own I swear the staring is worse. There's even some glaring.

How dare I defile the great Matt Jeneviere's shirt?! It was an accident people, I would never do something so stupid on purpose! Do you think I have a death wish? Do people actually believe that anti-fan crap? I didn't even know who he was until I came to college! I never keep up with celebrities. I only heard his name once or twice because my big sister and her friends talked about him from time to time, along with many other male actors. I can't keep track of them all.

Somehow the day continues without my death. No one attacks me, although a lot of people talk about me. Tori expresses his shock of my survival later that evening when he returns to our dorm. Then, by Thursday, the buzz has slowed down and Matt hasn't shown any sign of contacting me. Even during math, when he walks in, I don't get so much as a passing glance.

Maybe he doesn't know we share this class?

No, there's no way he doesn't know. Everyone is clearly talking and pointing to me, continuing to pester Matt about the mishap. Still, he doesn't give the discussion any of his time. That should make me happy, but it doesn't. I even brought an envelope with my number and a request to make monthly installments with about $50 already in it today in hopes to at least give him a little. But class comes to an end and Matt leaves quicker than I can get out of my seat, his goons following after as per usual.

How am I supposed to talk to him when he never sticks around anywhere long enough? Maybe I should give it to his bodyguard? He's always around, close enough to do his job but far enough to make approaching him far easier.

Ok. Ok, I can do that. I can definitely do that. Definitely.

The opportunity arrives at lunch time. We're in the dreaded scene of the crime; the food court. Matt is sitting at a crowded table. His bodyguard is one table away, keeping watch while eating an italian hoagie loaded with dressing that, honestly, looks amazing. I think I am trying to distract myself with the food rather than him. Doesn't really help since, even when approaching, I'm nervous. The dude is massive, probably capable of chucking me like a rag doll across the food court if he wanted. So, after I tap his shoulder and he turns to look at me, I completely freeze with fear.

This isn't a good idea. What the hell was I thinking? He's staring at me like I'm a lunatic. I'm starting to feel like one. I should just leave.

"Can I help you with something?" The guard asks.

Panic sets in. I thrust the envelope into his chest and sputter, "P-Please g-give this to Matt for the G-Gucci."

Then I'm gone, bursting out of the food court and onto the sidewalk outside where it's safe. Well, as safe as the most hated kid on campus can be.

"The Gucci?" I whine, dropping onto one of the benches. "Dana, you idiot. You can't even form a sentence."

I throw my head in my hands.

Oh, why, why, why? I'm an idiot. A fool. I'm going to buy sneakers with velcro from now on! Fuck shoe laces! But at least it's over with. I've done what I could and—

Ding!

Huh?

I stare at my phone that has lit up in my pocket. Who's messaging me?

Grabbing said phone, I see that it's an unknown number. How? I never put my number into anything online in order to avoid annoying texts and calls. Still, I open the message only to drop my phone with a loud "crack" on the pavement. Please, for the love of all that is holy or not in this world, tell me I didn't just break my phone.

Come on, Lady Luck, be on my side!

Reaching down, I grab my phone and whine again when I see an oh so beautiful crack in the left corner of the screen. Fuck you too, Lady Luck! The phone is still functioning, which is great considering that the mysterious message is from Matt that simply reads.

Food court restroom. Now.
-Matt

He seems mad.

W-W-What did I do? Did he expect all the money at once? Is he going to beat me up for not paying immediately? But I don't have that kind of money! If I did, I'd have a fucking Gucci shirt too! Well, probably not. They're pretty hideous, but wait, that's not the point. Damn, it doesn't seem like I can please anyone anymore. What did I do?! And why are we meeting in the restroom?

And, hey! What if I had class? I don't, but still!

Grumbling to myself, I send a quick "ok" before putting the phone in my pocket. The walk back to the food court is filled with only one constant thought that has been beating me to death all week; *I'm doomed, I'm doomed, I'm doomed.*

I never thought a restroom would scare me before, but it does now. Seeing that little white male figure innocently placed on a black door has become menacing. I swear the arm moves and he gives me the finger. Even my own imagination hates me now. Terrific.

Pushing open the door, I find the restroom to be empty, which wouldn't normally be odd except Matt said to meet there. I spin around as if I expect him to suddenly appear out of thin air. Suddenly, a hand grabs my shoulder and I'm yanked into a stall. The door slams shut behind me. After a soft "click" I know that it's locked. Not that it needs to be seeing as Matt's massive form standing directly next to it is enough to keep me from leaving.

Matt has always seemed like a big guy, but now it's unfair. Being crammed into a stall with him makes me realize that he has at least six inches on me height wise. It wasn't just make up or special effects that made him appear flawless either. Even at this close of a distance I can't make out a blemish on his skin. Excuse you, that's unfair. However, there is the faintest scar I've ever seen on the left side of his chin. Wonder how he got it?

That's not important right now though. My life is on the line.

"Uh—wha—why—i-is there a p-problem?" I ask, earning a sharp glare from Matt.

"Keep your voice down," he whispers, arms crossed and jaw set firmly in place.

"There's...no one e-else here, though."

"For now."

For now?

I swing my head from side to side although all I see are the blue stall walls. Does his posse plan to come running in to help beat the shit out of me? If so, it would have been easier to not be in the stall. Wait, that's not what I should be thinking about.

"Here." Matt suddenly holds out the envelope that I gave the guard.

"Ah, do...do you want to talk about the installments?"

Matt shakes his head. Well, what does he want to talk about then? I grab the envelope and look inside to find the money is still there.

"You didn't take the money yet." I try to hand it back but Matt refuses to accept it.

"You don't need to pay me back."

"But I should."

"Do I look like I need it?"

Wow, at least he's self aware. Still, I use the same reasoning I had told myself in order to explain, "Just because you have money doesn't mean people shouldn't pay you back. If someone rear ended your car, would you not make them pay for it?"

Matt is silent, watching me with a quiet scowl. He rolls his shoulders then responds, "I don't think a car wreck compares to spilling food on a shirt."

"It was a very expensive shirt."

"I have plenty."

Super self aware.

"Anyways—" Matt unlocks the door without warning and steps out, looking back at me with a blank expression. "Don't try to give me money again. I'll return it."

"Wait!" I call before Matt shuts the door. He tilts his head to the side curiously. This has been bugging me so..."Uh, why the restroom?"

"It's the only place where no one follows me."

"Ah...m-makes sense."

And with that, the door swings shut with a loud bang. I jump then stand there in shock until I hear the restroom door open and close, signaling Matt has left. Even minutes after he's gone, and I even heard a few more guys come in, I haven't moved. The envelope with money remains in my grasp but the note I had left with my number is gone, obviously, since he messaged me.

I guess this is a good thing. Not owing Matt a ridiculous amount of money for a shirt is the best case scenario...but I still don't feel that good about it.

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Since tomorrow is Memorial Day, here's an early update. I may end up being busy, depending on whether or not Dad wants to have a cook out for just us xD so yeah, enjoy! Yay, Matt isn't making Dana pay him back! But does that mean everything is resolved?

3. Don't Ruin the M&M's

Fridays are always busy at work. The Subway I work at is located next to campus so students and office workers alike pile in during the mornings and lunch hours. I have an opening shift at 7am Fridays to Sundays so I'm here bright and early. But not even ten minutes into the start of the day I'm faced with a group of familiar looking students.

"Hey, aren't you the idiot that dumped food all over Matt's shirt?" One of the guys snickers while pointing accusingly at me. The friend next to him smirks while the two girls behind huddled together start to scowl.

Oh no. I definitely recognize them now. One of the girls ordered me to apologize that day. I thought this was going to be all behind me after things have been going smoothly. Can't I catch a break?

"Did you pay him back yet?" That same girl asks, stepping around the group to stand before me with her hands on her hips. "Don't go thinking just because he has money that you shouldn't pay for anything."

That's what I said! But if I try to use that argument they'd probably be even ruder. Matt, why couldn't you have accepted the money? Then I could at least admit that I paid some. I could lie, but what if she asks Matt and he tells the truth?

"Uh...I...it-it's complicated?"

"How? Just give him some—"

"Excuse me," Becky, my snarky co-worker, calls from my side. When she smiles, so do her eyes, but those brown eyes are anything but friendly. "If you aren't going to order something then could you please step out of line? There's others waiting their turn and I'm sure they have places to be." She gestures to the growing line behind.

The girl goes red in the face, either from anger or embarrassment I'm not entirely sure. But she huffs and quickly mutters what she wants, her friends following after. Although they keep their gazes on me most of the time, they end up leaving without any more trouble.

"Thanks," I whisper to Becky once they're gone. She's working on piling enough vegetables to make a salad onto some dude's sandwich when she shrugs.

"No problem. I hate people that don't understand basic manners," Becky snarls then does a complete 180 and smiles like an angel at the customer, asking what else he would like.

Mental note; never piss Becky off. She gives me the shivers.

There is no repeat of the morning fiasco as the day goes by. I suspect some want to ask or say something. I get plenty of weird looks and quiet whispers but no one pesters me. Work is work. Becky isn't much of a talker. Neither am I. So the work gets done quickly and we're prepared for the lunch rush that always ends around two, which is the exact time my feet start to ache.

I sit in the back room after the lunch rush ends with a heavy groan. Becky is counting the money in the register since we reached our limit.

Ah, I haven't checked my phone since before noon. Not that I have a lot of people that talk to me so what does it matter. Still, I reach for said phone in my pocket and stare in curiosity at the message from an unknown number. Until I open it and realize I simply didn't save the number so I do that now in order to recognize it should he message again.

Matt: I've told everyone you are paying me monthly installments. They shouldn't bother you again. Sorry.

Ah, he must have heard from the group that came in this morning.

Me: It's ok. Thank you, I wasn't sure what to say this morning.

After pressing send, I enter in a quick second text.

Me: Are you sure you don't want me to pay you back?

I sit my phone aside, expecting to wait, but it dings a moment later. Did he really text back that fast?

Matt: I'm sure. If anyone bothers you again let me know. I'll handle it.

I start to laugh. He'll handle it? What the heck is that supposed to mean? If he already told everyone that then it shouldn't matter.

Me: I'm sure you won't have to, but thanks.

I smile at my phone. Matt doesn't seem so bad. He has that deep voice and stern expression all the time so I thought he'd be a complete asshole. Even yesterday in the restroom he didn't look very pleased. Maybe I've misjudged him?

"Hey Dana, a group is about to come in!" Becky calls moments before the bell above the door rings. I toss my phone aside and get up to help her out front. My feet are really killing me. Looks like I'll be needing new shoes soon. This pair is worn out too much.

Three o'clock arrives what feels like seconds later. My shift is over and I'm clocking out with every intention to head home, clean up and take a nap until the party. I should be able to get a good five to six hour nap in so that'll hopefully keep me from wanting to leave only an hour in.

"Hey, still feeling up to the party tonight?" Tori asks when I return to the dorm. He's lounging about in bed watching TV. I kick off my shoes. My feet are screaming at me but I smell like onions and old soup so I have to get a shower before laying down.

"Yeah, I can go. Gonna get a shower now."

"Cool. We're gonna leave a quarter till nine."

"Mhm!"

After a quick shower I throw myself into bed for a nap that easily takes me. Tori is waking me a little after eight so I can get ready. Looks like he has already started. His normally unruly black hair is brushed back with some type of product and he has a toothbrush hanging out of his mouth. The smell of mint is insanely strong with his face not far from mine.

"I'm up," I groan while sliding out of bed onto the floor. Searching the nightstand, I find my glasses and perch them on my face, yawning while stretching my arms and legs.

"Don't you have contacts?" Tori asks from the bathroom.

"Yeah, but I hate them."

"Probably not the best idea to wear glasses to a party. A bunch of drunks, you never know what will happen."

Ah. He's right. The last thing I want is for my glasses to break. With my luck lately, that is exactly what will happen!

"You've never been to a party either, yeah?" Tori asks while stepping out of the bathroom. He's a bit more dressed up than usual but nothing fancy, just a nice button down that's tucked into his pants.

I shake my head. "I've never really been the most popular guy."

"You don't need to be popular to go to a party. But I warn you, they can get rowdy—"

"I get the feeling you will be one of the rowdiest."

Tori presses a hand to his chest in what seems to be offense until he says, "I was just about to warn you about that. How did you know?"

I roll my eyes. That's not surprising at all.

It doesn't take me long to get ready. I throw on pants and a t-shirt, put in my contacts that have me rapidly blinking my eyes immediately afterwards then grabbing my belongings before following Tori out of the room. He's on

his phone, as usual, texting away with some girl he met in class. He's going to meet up with her there apparently, meaning I will probably end up alone. Not surprising.

Maybe it wasn't a good idea to come. I'm not exactly a social butterfly. Already I'm on the verge of passing out. So many people, so much alcohol all in one place is bound to create catastrophe. I'm probably not even going to have the guts to talk to anyone. The corner will be where I stay the whole evening I'm sure...

I shake my head. No! Come on, Dana. I can do this. I promised myself I'd give a try. The next four years will not consist of me studying alone in the dorms. I won't be the outcast like I was in high school. I'm going to make friends and try new things. Maybe even find myself a boyfriend?

I can do this. I can—

"Here we are!" Tori announces, gesturing to the frat house lit from the inside with colorful lights. From the street I can hear pop songs blaring at an ungodly volume. There are students littering the lawn with cups in hand. People can be seen dancing through the windows. A group of girls pass us, one smiles at Tori, who smiles back while I awkwardly hide behind him.

This definitely wasn't a good idea. What the hell am I thinking? Mr. Unsociable coming to a freaking frat party. These are the people that teased me in high school! They're the ones that shoved my head in a toilet. (Who does that nowadays? Seriously!)

Too late now. My fate is sealed.

Tori is heading inside with me quickly following. It's humid the moment we step into the house. Although I'm sure the AC is on there's simply too many people crushed into one space. The kitchen is filled with snacks and alcohol. People are going in and out getting refills or grabbing a bite to eat. The living room furniture has been moved to make a dance floor. There are lights strung about the ceiling and steps. There are sliding glass doors that lead to a pool outback where plenty of students are swimming or lounging about.

Wow, there are actually parties like this? I thought they were only in the movies. Part of me is a tad impressed. Where are the cops? They should probably be here in an hour or so, yeah? That's how they always work.

"Tori, you're here!"

Both Tori and I look up to see a cute blonde running over in a bikini with her wet hair draped over her shoulders. Tori's jaw drops then he snaps it closed with a grin. "Chelsea, already jumped in the pool I see."

"Of course. It's too stuffy in here anyways," Chelsea giggles while taking hold of Tori's arm. He doesn't seem to care about getting his shirt wet. Why would he when there's a half naked girl hanging off his arm? I glare at the no good perv, but he's too busy smiling at her to notice.

Then Chelsea's green eyes move over to me. Unlike Tori, who got sweet giggles and a soft smile, all I get is a curious eyebrow raise. Not surprising, I've got nothing on Tori. I've got nothing on most of the people in here. That's almost impressive.

"Is this your roommate?" Chelsea asks.

"Yeah, Dana this is Chelsea. Chelsea, Dana."

"Nice to meet you." She gives me a sweet smile, which is relieving, then returns her gaze back to Tori. "Come out back with me. There's drinks out there too."

"Sure." Tori gives me a glance as if to ask if I'm coming or not, but Chelsea is already tugging him along through the crowd. I barely manage to keep up, stumbling over my feet to reach the backyard, which is equally decked out. Seems someone forgot this was beach themed because there are tiki torches and little Hawaii decorations that are only found here.

Like Chelsea said, there are some coolers outback where Tori grabs us all a drink. I'm handed a beer, which I intensely dislike. In fact, I hate alcohol in general, but I always used the excuse that it's because I never really gave it

a shot. So, along with Tori and Chelsea, I give the beer the best chug I can and...

It's fucking disgusting.

Tori and Chelsea don't agree. Neither make the same twisted face of disgust. Instead, they're already chatting away laughing and drinking more. Hold up, when did either of them finish the first one? Where did it go?! But they're both twigs!

Chelsea has yet to let go of Tori's arm. The music catches her attention and she asks Tori for a dance. Just like that, I'm left alone, standing by the cooler with a beer that tastes of sweat and liquorice. Neither of which are good in the form of a beverage, in case anyone is wondering.

Why am I here again? To make friends? How?

I look about the backyard. Everyone has their own little cliques that sort of merge but I'm alone. A few students catch a look at me. They point and whisper. I know what they're talking about and it isn't good. But what was I expecting? I'd come and spend the whole night with Tori, miraculously come to like alcohol and learn to be social? As if! Especially with my luck lately.

You should have just stayed home, Dana.

Rather than linger by the coolers, I head back inside where there's a chance I can at least stumble into a conversation. Some people I recognized from my classes but the moment I walk over to them all I get are confused glances out of the corner of their eyes. Yeah, I give up and walk away without uttering a word.

Then I head for the kitchen and munch on a bag of M&M's. A girl comes in, shoves her hand in the bag, offers me a smile then runs off while tripping over her heels. That's the most social I get for the next hour. Even when I try to speak with anyone in the kitchen, the most I get is a "hey, you're that kid that ruined Matt Jeneviere's shirt, right?" Then the guy walks off

cackling about it. Well, this has been a catastrophe and it's definitely time to go. But I'm not going home empty handed...so the bag of M&M's is mine.

With candy in hand, I leave the party only an hour in and it has nothing to do with cops. I haven't seen or heard any so I give it another hour before some form of authority is called in.

The front lawn is still rather busy. There are some students sitting in the grass or leaning on the railing of the porch. When I hear mention of Matt again I lower my head and rush down the porch steps, which is a terrible mistake.

Some drunk guy stumbles right in front of me. Our eyes meet, both wide in a panic upon realizing that we are on a collision course. But he's drunk and I'm midstep so there's no helping it. We hit hard, sending us both to the ground. My elbow skids against the sidewalk. To make matters worse, my candy is scattered or crushed, what a waste!

But hey, my contacts are still in so...that's great? And since I wore them I didn't smash my glasses to smithereens! It's kind of a win!

"What the hell? Watch where you're fuckin' goin'!" The stranger slurs, stumbling to his feet to glare at me.

I immediately apologize since there's no use arguing with this drunk. His cheeks are flushed and eyes glazed over. Two of his friends are behind him, both smirking in amusement while I'm getting to my feet in order to nervously back away.

"You think you can just leave?" He snarls, gesturing to a red cup on the ground, which I'm assuming was his. "You spilled my drink!"

It's his own fault, that's what I should point out, but I don't have the guts to do it.

Nodding, I apologize again, "I'm really sorry about that. I, uh, I-I can get you another o-one? They're just i-inside."

For whatever reason, he doesn't seem to like that because he scowls and shoves me. I stumble back into the grass, clutching the crumbled M&M bag to my chest.

"Liam, drop it. He apologized."

Yes, listen to your friend, you dumb drunk!

"Shut it! I'll mess with him if I want!" Liam hollers, returning his narrowed gaze on me. "Besides, ain't you that idiot from the food court video?"

Really? Is there anyone who hasn't seen it? And why does it matter? He isn't even friends with Matt! I suppose no one really is, that I know of anyways. Still, leave me be! It was an accident!

"You like tripping all over people and starting shit?"

How does that make any sense? He's drunk and stupid!

"Come 'ere, I'll teach ya what happens for messing with people!" Liam suddenly pulls his fist back.

This is the part where I should run, but someone should tell my legs that because they aren't moving. So, with Liam's fist heading towards me, I shut my eyes in fear, waiting for the punch that's inevitable.

Only it never comes.

Instead, I hear an annoyed grunt followed by some snickers and gasps from those around us.

"Matt, dude, what the hell?!" Liam screams.

And when I open my eyes, sure enough, Matt is standing between us with his hand twisted around Liam's wrist.

~

My internet is still off x.x should be back on tomorrow, but luckily I had this chapter saved and ready to go already! I hope you're not lactose intolerant *sprinkles cheese* or this story may ruin you :) Matt to the rescue, what's gonna happen?!

4. Real Life is Stranger than Fiction

"Matt, dude, what the hell?!" Liam screams in slurred frustration.

Matt's angled so that he's blocking me from Liam's view. His wide back seems even bigger with that oversized hoodie he's wearing. The hood is up and his hair is brushed back under a black baseball cap while his bodyguard is nowhere to be seen.

Did he sneak out? Why? Wait, does he even live near here?

There's a bag in his hand from the nearby gas station, seems there are some snacks inside so I guess he lives close by. If he wanted some snacks, why not take a car? I've seen him driving a black Mercedes so I know he has one, Mr. Rich and Famous.

"I should be asking you that," Matt replies while pushing Liam's arm away. The jerk stumbles back. His friends catch him before he topples over. "He apologized. Why are you trying to start a fight?"

"He started it!"

"Are you really that drunk, or just stupid?"

Liam growls. Matt turns away without a care. His blue eyes fall to me in a quiet stare. With his hair is brushed it gives an even better view of his stupidly attractive face.

Ah, wait, what's he doing here? Why help me? I'd ask, but honestly, I rather he keep helping until I'm out of this situation. My chicken arms would snap if I even considered throwing a punch, let alone actually go through with it.

"Let's go," Matt says while swaying his head to the side in a gesture towards the street.

"Let's...go?"

Matt doesn't explain. He walks away without a word. The big question is, should I follow?

Seeing Liam out of the corner of my eye completely fuming and still very much drunk, I decide the hell with it, and bolt after Matt. Everyone is talking. I hear their chatter until we're at the end of the street. Matt is walking a few steps ahead of me, head down, proving that he definitely snuck out and is trying to keep his face from being seen. If that's the case, why help me? This will be the next talk of the school.

The great Matthew Jeneviere helped the loser that spilled lunch all over his fancy shirt. Why? Maybe because he definitely wants his money so he can't have the kid dying? Who knows! And what's he doing out so late anyways? He definitely wasn't at the party.

"Um...Matt?" I end up calling, earning myself a quiet hum in response. "Thanks, y'know, for the help."

"Mm."

Not much of a conversationalist, is he? I can't complain, neither am I.

Silence falls between us. The occasional car drives past on the road. Sometimes Matt's footsteps are heavy enough to sound like a stomp. The grocery bag crinkles in the wind and I clutch my ruined M&M's. So much for not leaving empty handed. This is hella awkward, but we both end up walking until I see the local gas station. To get to the dorms we should turn right, but Matt ends up going left.

"Ah, I'll s-see you around." I'm not sure if I stated or asked that. Either way, it earns me a cocked brow from Matt when he turns to face me.

"We're going to the gas station."

"We?" I point to me then him.

"Yes. You're bleeding."

That's when my body decides to recognize pain. A pain that shoots up my arm and causes me to hiss. Pulling said arm up, I find that my elbow has a pretty nasty burn from the sidewalk. Blood is dripping from the wound. I even left a trail behind us!

"The gas station is closer," Matt says, like that's enough of an explanation. Once more, he walks across the street simply expecting me to follow.

But I don't want to follow. We don't know each other well. Sure he helped me out, but being with Matt is asking to be in the spotlight. Everything he does is watched and discussed, like he's an animal in the wild getting another documentary. Sighing, I end up following only because I would feel guilty otherwise. This whole situation is weird. I'm not entirely sure how to handle it.

"Hello!" The store clerk calls when we step in. He offers us both a smile but Matt is already heading for the bandages. I give the clerk an awkward smile and run after Matt.

"Uh, I can do this at home?" I suggest when Matt hands me a box of bandages.

He's grabbing some antibiotic ointment when he answers, "Is anyone there? It'd be hard to do on your own."

Ah. That's right. I didn't tell Tori I was leaving. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my phone only to see Tori has messaged me stating that he wouldn't be home tonight. Seems him and Chelsea really hit it off. Well, at least they aren't coming back to do the dirty deed at the dorms.

"Nope, it's just me tonight."

Matt doesn't respond to that. He's heading for the cash register without warning. He does that a lot. I rush after him since I see that he's reaching for his wallet. Before he manages to pay for it, I literally throw my wallet on the counter. Both he and the clerk stare at me in confusion.

"Ah, I got it," I laugh nervously, quickly grabbing some money to hand to the clerk before he even rings everything up.

Matt is standing next to me with his hands in his pockets, but the moment everything is paid for he grabs it and asks, "May we have the key to the restroom?"

The clerk hands us the key and we head to the restroom. Hey, this feels oddly familiar. I don't lock the door behind us though.

I start to laugh just as Matt washes his hands. While doing so he asks, "What?"

"We're in a restroom again," I explain, gesturing to the room around us. "At least this time it isn't a crowded stall."

"Ah."

Ah? That's his only reaction? Ah? Well, I thought it was funny. Boy clearly doesn't understand good comedy.

"Put your elbow under the water," Matt orders, gently pressing his hand to the back of my arm.

The water stings a bit but it's nice to see the dirt clearing out. My arm is quickly cleaned and, once we both see the debris is out, Matt turns the faucet off. He hands me some paper towels that I use to dry off my arm while he opens the antibiotic and band-aids.

"Put some antibiotics on the next few days. Change the bandage at least once a day," Matt says, which should be caring but his voice never changes. He almost sounds bored. Even his expression gives way that he's annoyed, but if that were the case, why would he be helping so much? He even goes so far as to put the antibiotic on himself.

"You seem good at this," I mutter, watching Matt work with such concentration that it makes my cheeks a little warm.

I never see him concentrate that much on anyone. In school he pays close attention, but to people? Not even a little. Those around him talk, he rarely responds. They ask him to hang out, he always says no. Matt is in his own little world, but right now, it feels like we're sharing that world.

"At what?" Matt asks without looking away from his work.

"Just...this."

Seems he understands because he nods.

"I guess. I have three younger siblings so—" Matt shrugs and, honestly, that is explanation enough.

"Wow, three? So are you the oldest?"

"Mhm."

"I'm the youngest. I have an older sister."

"Mm."

Once Matt deems the wound treated, he gently puts a band-aid on. He's so concentrated that I can't stand looking at him so I stare at the floor. The tiles are nice. They're surprisingly clean. Someone give the clerk a raise. This is the cleanest gas station restroom I've ever seen. Usually they smell of B.O. and trash, but I detect some scent of lavender.

"Um...y-you know you didn't have to help so much," I mumble. Matt stands up straight, finally releasing my arm so that it swings next to my side. I don't know what expression he's making because I refuse to look at him. "Jumping into the fight and even helping with a little scratch. We don't even know each other."

"Do we need to?" Matt asks without hesitation. "If you saw someone in trouble that you could help, wouldn't you help them?"

"Well...I guess...I'd like to i-if I could, so that's true."

I scratch nervously at the back of my head. Not only am I not paying him back, but now he has also helped me out. I should at least treat him to lunch or something.

"I need to get going," Matt suddenly says, grabbing his own bag. He's heading for the door before I can even think of what to say, but before he goes, he looks back at me and shows the softest smile I've ever seen. Just the slightest upward tilt of his lips so he looks almost sly, but when he does it there is a slight sign of dimples. How fitting.

"Try to stick out of trouble on your way home, Dana."

"Ah, y-yeah, I'll try!"

Matt leaves without another word.

Is this real life? Somehow I went from spilling food on the campus superstar to being helped by him in less than a week. Holy shit, I even have his number. Not that I plan to tell anyone that since I'm sure some dumb ass will try to abuse that knowledge. Still, this...this can't be happening.

Is this the Matrix glitching? It must be. Because there's no way the Matthew Jeneviere would speak to me let alone know my—

Dana.

He knows my name?!

Ah, well, I guess someone told him after all the drama. Obviously, haha...

~

***whispers* they had a moment~ Hope you're enjoying these two fools so far!**

5. Little Town to College Town

School life returns to normalcy come Monday morning. All the chatter is calmed down to the point that I rarely hear any mention of the dreaded food court incident. No one brings up what happened at the party either, which likely has to do with Matt stepping in. Everyone probably took his side without even hearing the whole story, although if they had I would hope they still took his side.

But it's finally easier to traverse campus on my own. No more worries about getting jumped or hearing profanities thrown my way. We're back to the regularly scheduled program! Which isn't an exciting program but it has higher ratings than what it was a few days ago.

"How does it feel to have freedom?" Tori asks during lunch. Chelsea is with him, sitting at his side while playing on her phone. Her friend, Rose, sits next to me with a soft smile but says nothing.

We're sitting in the food court, far away from Matt. I make sure of that now. My eyes glance over to him, finding the campus superstar surrounded as usual. His head is down as he eats his lunch. It's clear he's quiet. I don't even see him speak. I rarely do. His mouth is glued shut more than mine.

"Great," I finally answered with a happy nod. "I don't know if I could survive had it gone on any longer."

"Wouldn't it have been cool if you already had a YouTube channel and posted the video yourself though?" Chelsea asks, causing all to look at her. She grins from ear to ear. "I bet you could have monetized it real quick and at least made some money!"

Tori snickers and, well, she's right. I probably could have. What a missed opportunity! The revenue probably could have paid for Matt's Gucci shirt. Damn.

"Oh, right, didn't Matt help you at the party Friday?" Rose inquires. Tori and Chelsea's jaws drop in shock, both turning their gazes to me. The spotlight has been moved to shine directly above my head and there's no escape.

"Uh, y-yeah."

"What the hell? When? Why? How?!" Every question Tori has, I had back then as well. Glad I am not the only one confused.

"I was walking down the steps to leave when someone stumbled in the way. We collided and he got super pissed—"

"And Matt showed up," Rose interrupts with a firm nod. Now everyone watches her as she explains the story she has to have heard from someone else. "He grabbed some guy, uh, Liam, was it?"

I nod.

"Matt grabbed Liam's arm and pushed him back. He stood up for Dana and they left together. Everyone was talking about."

Tori chuckles. "Everyone talks about anything Matt is involved in, but what the hell? Why didn't you tell me, Dana?"

"You were gone...all weekend."

Chelsea bites her lip. Tori's cheeks go a little pink. Rose and I roll our eyes. No need for details on that weekend adventure.

"Besides, that's the gist of it. Nothing interesting," I say, but only because I don't want anyone interrogating me about what happened after. Matt helping me, even tending to the scratch, that would probably cause an uproar too. I'm done with those. I've had enough to last me a lifetime!

"How is spending time with a movie star not interesting?" Chelsea groans, pressing her elbows to the table so she can rest her head in her hands. She's pouting, practically pleading with her eyes to give details. "Come on, Dana.

What happened after? Did he say why he helped? Is it because he wanted to make sure you were ok to keep working to pay him back?"

Tori furrows his brows because he knows I'm not paying Matt back. However, I give him a quick glare to state he better not bring it up. Nodding, he acts like he knows nothing and I explain, "We just walked. He headed home and I came back to the dorms. I guess he just helped because he could."

"Wow, handsome, rich and caring. I was unaware that people like that existed," Rose giggles. "Still, I wish we could have switched places. I would have loved for Matt to come to my rescue."

"Same!" Chelsea squeals until Tori looks at her with offense. She slaps his arm. "Please, you would like it too."

Tori says nothing, which actually says a lot. We all break into laughter. My phone vibrates in my pocket. Without much thought, I grab it to read over and nearly choke on my lunch upon seeing who it is.

Matt: *Has anyone bothered you about Friday?*

N-No one saw he messaged me, right?!

I look frantically at those at the table. They're all talking, unaware of my predicament. Ok, play it cool. Play it cool. If you make the message seem important then they'll think it's important. Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

Me: *No. Nothing has happened, thanks again.*

Hesitantly, I peer across the food court to Matt. He's sitting quietly with his group, food finished but still not partaking in conversation. Then he looks at his phone.

Ah, my cheeks are warm again. Please stop.

But they worsen when Matt picks up his phone and reads over something. I'm assuming it's my message, which is proven correct when my phone vibrates again.

Matt: *np*

Then Matt looks up just as I do and our eyes meet for a brief moment. I turn away quickly. Our message thread is deleted and I shove my phone back into my pocket because if anyone finds out I have his number I am going to be jumped by the whole school. I'm not even sure if his "friend group" has his number.

The moment it's time for my next class I'm getting up to leave. Rose follows since we actually found out we share a class together. We simply never talked since we weren't introduced until today when Chelsea started hanging around with Tori. It's nice to have her though, someone I know at least a little. Our conversations are a bit forced and awkward as we don't know each other that well yet but it's better than nothing.

The big difference between us though is that Rose is a pretty girl with a lot of friends. So when we get to our class and sit side by side there are a few more new faces. Immediately I feel confined. Four guys come over to talk to Rose, all seeming to know her and offering up smiles while I'm left nervously sitting on the sidelines.

There's too many people. It's stuffy. I want to move.

"So your name is Dana?" One of the guys asks and I swing my head around to look at the brunette smirking at me. Rose must have told him my name. "Must suck owing Matt money. The fanatics are probably at your throat."

"Aha...n-not really."

"I'm Nick, by the way. This is Taylor, Shawn and Kyle." Nick gestures from one guy to the next. "Rose and I went to high school together."

"That's cool...m-must be nice to already know some people."

"Yeah."

And that's the extent of our conversation since Rose is pulled back in to talking with them. Nick is definitely hitting on her. She flushes before

playfully patting his shoulder. Now I definitely want to leave. Normal interactions are awkward, but flirtatious ones are even worse! At least class saves me from seeing more of it. Once our professor walks in, that's the end of it, literally, since I have no more classes and can head home afterwards.

My headphones are in as I walk from the English Department to the dorms at the end of campus. Even with what has been going on, I am happier here. School was a major pain for me for the longest time. Growing up in a small town where everyone knew everyone. Even if you claimed you didn't, their faces were familiar and you probably knew more about them than the average stranger. There was a certain...lack of personal space and sometimes people felt like they were closer than they actually were.

In my case, I didn't feel that close with anyone. My sister, Bridget, always tried her best to at least get me involved with her friends. With our six year age gap it didn't really do much. So I went to school day after day with people I wasn't all that close with and laughed at their stupid jokes thrown my way. I remember when the *"red heads don't have souls"* was a big thing in elementary school. Oh, what a joy that was! (Please note the immense sarcasm.)

Then when all the guys started shooting up height wise I kind of...stayed the same so that resulted in some teasing. It's not as if any of them meant anything by it. The jokes weren't always malicious, some were cracking jokes as if expecting me to return it, but I always awkwardly laughed it off and kept going. Here though, that doesn't happen.

Yes, the food court incident was a big deal, but I've never been met with anything else. And I kind of like walking around campus not knowing every face that walks by me. Wondering who they are or what they're like or if I'll ever meet them, that wasn't something I thought about before because I knew, at some point, I'd meet the new face at our school, if there ever was one.

However, my parents aren't as happy with my move.

"You know, I will happily help you transfer to a closer school if you feel uncomfortable there, Dana," Mom says that evening when she calls. I can

hear Dad cursing in the background. Probably watching a game.

"I am fine, Mom, really."

"You sure? I, just, you've never been this far from home before. And even if you're in the dorms I'm not there to cook or clean—have you been cleaning?"

"Yes!" That's a complete lie. Good thing she mentioned it.

"I'm worried. What if you get sick?"

"I'll take medicine."

"But I'm not there and we miss you here. Why did you have to go so far away?"

Maybe it makes me a little mean to enjoy her worrying, but I guess it's only natural. She's my mom and I am her baby boy. It's not like I left to avoid my parents. They are by far what I miss the most. Being at home with them, eating dinner and watching TV, even watching sports with Dad. He never pushed me into them despite his love for them, but he definitely loves watching them with me just as an excuse to be together. And, well, I don't mind. It can be a lot of fun listening to him get so passionate that he nearly spits pop all over himself.

"I'll be home for break and you'll have me every year all summer," I say with a soft smile, which she can't see. I bet she knows I'm doing it though.

"That's not long enough!"

"What are you going to do when I get a job and move out?"

Mom gasps, "You're already thinking about moving out for good? But...you can just stay with us."

Dad cackles in the background and I swear I hear him shout, "If you come back, she won't let you leave!"

He definitely said that cause Mom curses and leaves the phone for a moment. There are a few seconds of soft smacks and Dad cackling before Mom returns to say, "Ignore your Dad. He's a lunatic."

"What does that make you? The one that married him."

"I'm sorry, did you say something to your loving mother that's paying for your college tuition?"

"You gonna go there?"

"You went there first."

I roll my eyes and our conversations lasts for a while, until Tori comes back. He has a teasing smirk but says nothing since we both know his mom calls him at least once a day too. But after I hang up and look to my phone my eyes kind of linger on my contacts. Just above "Mom" is "Matt" and it still baffles me that it's there. I'm almost tempted to change his name.

I end up laughing at myself. Matt is a common name and I didn't put his last name so it's no big deal. Before I do something stupid, like accidentally call him or something, I throw my phone off to the side.

Then Tori asks, "You finish the homework for math?"

"Damn it!"

"Take that as a no."

"Did you?"

Tori howls with laughter. What a useless roommate!

~

Dana is such a sweetie *hugs* hope you all had a nice weekend, happy Monday? lol

6. True Horror Is Here

It's Thursday and I'm currently deciding what I want from the vending machines before Freshman Seminar. Even if I ate lunch not long ago, I am in the mood for a snack! That reminds me, there wasn't much at the dorm this morning breakfast wise. I need to go grocery shopping later.

I'm about to snag a bag of chips when an arm is suddenly thrown around my shoulder. The weight nearly pushes me to the ground. Someone laughs that I vaguely recognize then a voice says, "Whoa, didn't think you'd nearly topple over, Dana!"

I peer up to find Nick. His friends are missing. I'm surprised to see him, let alone that he remembers me...or even put his arm around me. Does he not have a personal space bubble? Cause I do, and he's very much breaking it. If only I had the guts to say that!

"Yeah, I'm—I'm not really steady on my feet," I nervously laugh and fiddle with my wallet.

Is he going to let go? Maybe leave? That'd be great.

"Whatcha getting?" Nick asks like we're old friends and this isn't a totally awkward interaction. No? Is it just me? Ah, probably.

"Doritos."

"That does sound good." Nick suddenly pulls away and reaches into his back pocket. I watch curiously when he reaches from one pocket to the next to bring up nothing. "Shit, I must have forgot my wallet. You happen to have an extra dollar on you?"

"Oh, um, yeah."

I reach into said wallet to hand him a dollar, which he thanks me for with a blinding smile. I do my best to return it, watching Nick reach out to get a

bag of chips for himself. He holds up the change afterwards, which I say he can keep then he leaves just like that.

Pretty sure he had his wallet and he just used me for some free food, but whatever, it was just a dollar. Shaking my head, I turn to finally get my own. Once I have it and I'm about to walk into class, I lock eyes with Matt by the door though. He's watching me with that same quiet stare, which has me looking behind to see if there's anyone else he can possibly be looking at.

Well, there are some other students but none are really looking this way. When I turn back around all Matt does is shake his head, like he's disappointed or something, then walks into the room with his bodyguard following behind. At least the guard offers me up a smile.

What the hell was that about? Did he see me give Nick a dollar? Why would he care? Unless now he's regretting not asking me to pay him back and seeing me give out money has made him change his mind?! Oh, as much as it does make sense to pay him back, I don't have that kind of money. Please tell me I'm not going to be in this dilemma again!

Grumbling, I walk into class to take my usual seat. Freshman Seminar isn't anything special. There's not necessarily work, more like an introduction into college. Each class we're informed of something else on campus that we can use to our benefit like what's available at the gym as a student and an alumni, to how or where to look for jobs either part time or full. It's basically an informational course to get us moving around campus and interacting with each other, so it isn't that shocking when Professor Tarue suddenly says, "This weekend I have an assignment for you all that must be done in pairs!"

Immediately people start whispering to team up. Tarue silences them real quick by saying, "Pairs that I will assign."

A series of aw's fly through the room that Tarue rolls her eyes at. Smiling, she leaned against her desk and looks over us while explaining, "The purpose of this class is to get you comfortable not only on campus but also with the people. This is a new beginning for many so we need you making

friends with others that you may not have given the chance otherwise. First though, I'll say the assignment is easy. Simply go together to see a movie, you can watch one for free at the campus' theater, and write me a one page review, but you have to go together. I want tickets and a picture as proof."

She looks around the room, knowing that people could still easily get around that if they want, although I doubt anyone will. Seeing a movie as part of a class assignment isn't bad at all. However, the idea of speaking with a stranger is. I'm already dreading it.

Tarue starts reading off the pairings one by one. I listen carefully for my name knowing that I'll be troubled regardless of who it is. However, the further down the list she gets the more I focus on the fact that she hasn't called Matt's name either.

While there are few giggling and anxious at the idea of being with Matt, I'm on the verge of exploding from fear alone. Sweat forms on my brow when we're down to only eight people then six then four—

"Matthew Jeneviere—"

Please, Universe, please no!

"And Amanda Shellings."

THANK YOU! Oh thank you Jesus, Satan, Buddha, whomever, thank you! I can finally breathe again.

"Dana Thommens and Harper Kelzberg. Now meet up with your partners, that's all for the day!"

Immediately people are rushing about. Amanda practically teleports from her seat to Matt's. I actually feel bad for him when Amanda sits on his desk. No, not sits in a chair, but sits *on* his damn desk. Good thing he didn't have anything on his desk or it would have been under her ass. I definitely give Matt props for keeping a perfectly normal expression but, curiously, I notice him picking at his thumbnail beneath his desk.

"Dana?" A voice calls from behind.

I turn to see a boy not much taller than me, but definitely more built. He has short black hair, green eyes and a soft smile. Actually, I think I've seen him in that group of guys that jog in the early mornings around the dorms.

"Y-Yeah, I'm Dana." I wave shyly while Harper sits at the empty desk across from me. He has a duffle bag rather than a backpack. Yep, definitely the athletic type.

"Harper. We should probably exchange numbers first," he says while bringing out his phone.

Once I tell him my number he messages me and I save his with a pleased smile. The fact that I have a cute guys number now is by far the biggest accomplishment I've ever made in my life. Thank you, Professor Tarue, for partnering me with the cute jogger. Bridget would be proud of me. Not that I'm going to tell her since she'll tease me the entire time. Besides, we're only associating because of class so it's no big deal. I can still be happy about it though!

"Are there any movies that you want to see?" Harper asks. "I'm not much of a movie person so I haven't been paying much attention."

"Um, I like h-horror and action so...either of those. But I don't really know what's out either."

"Oh cool, I'm good with either of those too!" Harper looks at his phone. While getting up, he explains, "I have basketball practice so, uh, why don't you text me what times are good for you later and we'll go from there?"

"O-Ok, sure, sounds good."

"Cool, see you later then."

With that, Harper leaves. That was easier than expected. Seems I have the social type as a partner so I guess that's a good thing. He can do all the talking while I just nod and go along with it.

Since that's over, I grab my things and head out. Tonight I have to try and get as much homework done as possible. I'm always exhausted on the weekends from work. Plus with having to go see a movie, although we have until next Thursday to do it, it'll just be easier on the weekends for the both of us, most likely.

So that night I text Harper my schedule, which only consists of work from 7 to 3 on the weekends. He replies that he's free in the evenings so we agree on Saturday at 6. Then by Friday afternoon we have picked a movie, some horror that'll probably be like all the others. We both agree that it'll be easy to review regardless of whether we enjoy it or not. I'm so happy that I got partnered with Harper instead of Matt. I was really scared there for a while!

Imagine if that happened. The mere thought makes me laugh then shiver in fear. Yet another thing that'll cause an uproar. I'm sure many will talk about the food court shit again, which has died down so let's keep it that way, please and thank you! Not to mention it's just awkward and I don't want anymore attention, at least not the kind Matt gets. So thank you, thank you Professor Tarue!

After work on Saturday I get a shower and change. There's no way I'm going to sit in a movie theater with anyone smelling like a sandwich shop. It may seem good when you step in and you're hungry but smelling it for hours? Nope. Disgusting. Puke worthy.

"Heading out on your date?" Tori asks once I'm dressed and ready to go.

"It's not a date. It's an assignment for Freshman Seminar."

"So? It can still be a date."

"Not happening. Even if I had the guts to flirt with him, he's way out of my league."

"Hey, hey, hey, none of that!"

"None of what?" I ask, slipping on my sneakers at the doorway.

"None of that lack of self confidence. It is not allowed here."

"Then I'll take it outside."

"You know what I mean!" Tori shouts after I close the door.

Chuckling, I leave before he can come after me. Regardless of what he says, it's true. I'm aware that I'm not the best looking guy nor am I intelligent or even filthy rich. I am at the bottom of the food chain, dating chain, social chain? Whatever it is, either way, I've accepted it.

Harper is there by the time I'm five minutes out. Good, he doesn't have to wait long. Once I'm off the bus I head for the theater in the mall, finding Harper just outside. He waves from the entrance with a smile, gesturing for me to come over.

"Hey, you won't believe who else came to see the same movie," Harper laughs while pointing inside to the line. I can't even think of who it might be, but my smile falls the moment I realize.

Waiting in line for their tickers are Amanda and Matt.

Amanda is dressed up from head to toe in a babydoll white dress, black hair pulled back into a cute bun and some heels to match. She is definitely dressed like it's a date while Matt, not so much. Like the night he helped me out, he's wearing a large gray hoodie and a black hat with the bill turned down. His hair is brushed back beneath said hat making him unrecognizable so long as he keeps his gaze low. Once in the dark theater, he'll be even safer. His bodyguard is nowhere to be seen. Is that ok? I guess so if he came out.

The moment Amanda sees us she waves in our direction. She must know Harper since they both appear happy to have run into each other while I am fucking dreading it even before catching Matt's gaze.

He looks bored, as usual, standing with Amanda. Hands are shoved in his pockets, head down and a very obvious distance between them, not that Amanda hasn't tried to walk closer. When she does, Matt happily steps

away, which has the people behind them growing annoyed based on their scowls. So eventually Amanda stops and I almost want to laugh, but well, almost everyone is like that with Matt. He has plenty of people trying to get close to him, as friends or more.

"Come on," Harper says with a smile. "Let's get our tickets so we can all sit together."

"H-Huh?" I swing my head to Harper then back to Matt, who is no longer watching us. Rather his attention is on the floor where he's scuffing the tip of his shoe. "O-Ok. Sure."

And here I thought I avoided seeing a movie with him, damn it all!

~

Oh Dana, you silly thing. Of course you can't avoid this, I'M THE ONE IN CHARGE! How do you think the movie will go? ^^

7. A Movie Date, This Is Not

"What a coincidence that we're all seeing the same movie at the same time!" Amanda chirps after we all get our tickets and snacks.

"Yeah, although I guess most people are going to see movies on the weekend," Harper replies with a nod. "But I'm surprised. Amanda, you like horror?"

"Totally! I'm so glad Matt and I have that in common."

"I'm not a huge fan of horror," Matt says, causing all eyes to turn to him. Amanda's cheeks tinge pink. "There just weren't any others I haven't seen already."

"You've already seen everything?" Harper asks in disbelief while Amanda bows her head bashfully at Matt's side. Seems she's embarrassed. Now I'm starting to feel bad.

"I like movies," Matt replies.

"That makes sense. You are an actor." Harper laughs, the only one that doesn't seem bothered by this whole situation. Wow, I wish I had that kind of strength...or obliviousness. Not sure which one it is yet.

"Wait, we're supposed to take a picture!" Amanda shouts just before we enter the theater. Good thing too because, judging by our faces, none of us remembered. Amanda laughs. "Come on, let's take one all together."

Harper agrees and, well, Matt and I don't seem to have a say in the matter. Suddenly Harper has his phone out. Amanda is squeezing up against Matt. Harper is pushing against me and, bam, my arm is pressed against Matt's. I dare not look up, not even when I swear I feel his eyes pointed at me.

"Smile!" Harper orders.

I don't think I can.

In the end, he takes a few shots with me anxiously awaiting stepping away. My arm feels way too warm.

"Ok, this looks good!" Harper shouts and finally gives me freedom. I take three quick steps back, which has Matt watching me with confused eyes that I choose to ignore.

"How about this one?" Harper asks, showing it to all of us.

"That's cute!" Amanda says.

Matt has no comment so Harper looks to me, the one that is red in the face currently, and in that picture, but there's no way I can take another.

"L-Looks good," I tell him.

"Cool, I'll text it to you guys after. Let's head in."

So the four of us make it into the theater to take our seats. Amanda finds a place in the middle and sits with Matt beside her. It isn't until I'm standing next to his seat that I turn to ask Harper to switch, only he is already seated. He smiles up at me, this time definitely oblivious.

"Something wrong?" He asks.

Oh how I wish I could say yes and make an excuse to switch seats, unfortunately my brain is not capable of coming up with that kind of nonsense on the spot. With a nervous laugh, I shake my head and take a seat with my arms curled towards me in hopes to not even brush against Matt. Why? I don't know. He has Celebrity-itus? I just don't want to be here, ok! I was happy with being Harper's partner, but now it's ruined. I might as well have been with Matt!

Groaning, I throw my head back against the chair, earning a confused eyebrow raise from Matt. I offer him an apologetic smile that he simply looks away from. This is going to be one long and awkward movie.

Other viewers start piling in. The lights dim and the commercials start to play. Harper has the popcorn sitting in his lap so I attempt to scoot closer to him to keep a distance between Matt and myself. That should work, only Amanda is using the dark theater and horror movie as an excuse to be close to Matt, who is clearly not pleased with her plan.

"You're leaning on me," Matt says so bluntly that it has Harper choking and me staring in shock.

Wow, he has guts.

Amanda, once again, goes red from embarrassment when saying, "O-Oh, sorry, Matt."

He nods and leans back into the seat. Then his gaze turns to me where I swing my head around real quick. Ok, no looking at Matt for the rest of the movie. I'm meant to be writing a review so pay attention!

Except that's a bit hard to do when there are two noisy people with us. Well, one is only noisy because of the troubles the other causes, but—

"Aaahhh!" Amanda screams, throwing the entire bowl of popcorn out of her lap. It goes everywhere, including on Matt and the people in front of her. She gets some very annoyed glances while Harper and I pretend we don't know them.

Matt narrows his eyes then says, "You said you were ok with horror."

Amanda is shivering with fear in her seat. I can see dark bags forming under her eyes already. She's practically in tears, too scared after a mere 30 minutes of the movie to even consider finishing. Then at every jump she grabs hold of Matt or buries her face in his arm. Harper and I keep looking over to see and, wow, Matt has never looked so out of place. I wouldn't say he's mad, more uncomfortable, pulling away and whispering, *"Stop grabbing me,"* or *"Just leave."*

He has no mercy. I suppose I can't blame him since it's obvious Amanda chose a horror movie as an excuse to cuddle and now she's facing the

consequences. Still, when I look to Harper, even he has an apologetic frown. In the end, Amanda leaves about 15 minutes later claiming that she'll wait in the food court. The moment she's gone Matt clicks his tongue in annoyance and sits comfortably in place, arms crossed and brows furrowed. I pity him just a little bit. Just a little.

At least we can enjoy the rest of the movie, which honestly wasn't too scary. It mostly had jump scares and that gets old after a while. So once it's over the three of us get up to head out. Harper starts chuckling outside, throwing away our empty popcorn bag while asking, "Why'd you agree, Matt?"

"What?" Matt asks, digging through his front hoodie pocket to find popcorn. He rolls his eyes and tosses it in the trash.

"To a horror movie. You knew it was just an excuse."

"For what?" Matt hums, blinking rapidly at the both of us with obvious confusion.

He's joking, *right?*

Except the longer Harper and I stand here staring at him the more we realize, *holy shit, he isn't joking* .

Harper looks to me like he expects me to explain. I ain't touching that topic with a ten foot pole though! So I shrug and pretend I don't know either.

"You know what happens when you watch a horror movie, you've been in romance dramas!" Harper exclaims, the three of us now walking out of the theater. "Cuddling, she wanted an excuse to cuddle and be close with you."

"That's a stupid idea," Matt says so bluntly that it has both Harper and I tripping over our own feet. Matt keeps walking as if he isn't aware of the situation and I'm starting to think that to be true.

Was he that oblivious to Amanda's plans? How?! She was so obvious about it that anyone within a ten mile radius could feel her intent!

But there isn't time to discuss it further since Amanda is waiting for us. She's been embarrassed enough today so I don't bring it up. Neither does Harper.

Matt, however, is a force I never want to reckon with. "Did you really choose a horror movie because you hoped to cuddle?" he asks without hesitation or remorse.

Harper's jaw drops. I don't even want to consider what kind of face I'm making. Amanda hasn't just gone red in the face, I swear her entire body is giving off a blinding red aura while her lips start to quiver.

"You better hope they'll explain the movie to you because I'm not." Then Matt reaches into his hoodie pocket, pulls out headphones, and leaves without giving either of us a proper goodbye. And we're all too shocked to do or say anything until he disappears around the corner towards the exit.

"Oh my god!" Amanda screams suddenly earning wide-eyed looks from Harper and myself. She throws her hands over her face then stomps childishly with very clear embarrassment. "Oh my god, oh my god!"

"Hey, Amanda, uh...I can tell you about the movie. You can look over my review?" Harper suggests, walking over awkwardly to peer at Amanda, but she refuses to take her hands from her face. Understandable. I'm embarrassed and I didn't even do anything.

"Stupid. How embarrassing! I...can we talk later?" Amanda asks, finally dropping her hands to show utter defeat on her face. Harper nods. She gives the both of us a sad smile then walks away, head down and arms crossed over her chest.

"Not to sound like a jerk, but...she shouldn't have tried to do that so—" Harper bites his lip, looking at me to see if I agree, which I do.

"Yeah. Still, Matt was brutal."

"I'm not surprised. Probably best if he is."

Following Harper to one of the tables in the food court, I ask, "What do you mean?"

"Well, he's a celebrity that's walking around on campus. Most of the people that talk to him probably want something. Maybe not money, but just 15 minutes of fame or an introduction to someone else. Matt has connections, to more than just actors too, so he has to be on his toes probably."

That's true. Matt must be used to people approaching him with ulterior motives. Even if he doesn't always know what they are, it's likely he assumes it's there first and has to wait to find out the truth. Must be rough. I certainly couldn't imagine a life like that. It's hard enough being your average joe.

"Crap!" Harper suddenly shouts making me jump. He looks at me with a frown. "I forgot to get Matt's number so I could send him the picture."

I keep the fact that I have Matt's number to myself. I shouldn't be handing it out without his permission anyway. "Ah, well, Amanda can show it. I mean, we're all in it so as long as one of us has it."

"True, but I thought he might like to have—" Harper snorts. "Maybe not though, after what happened."

I chuckle along with him then the topic of our unpleasant guests during the movie are dropped in order to discuss said movie over some food. Harper and I manage to come up with some good info to talk about in a review then go our separate ways later that evening. It definitely won't take long to write a short paper. I'm grateful to Professor Tarue for making it so simple and, well, I think it worked. Harper seems like a nice guy so if I see him around on campus again I won't feel all that weird about saying hello. Amanda though...I don't really want to speak with her again. Just going to bring up bad memories.

Speaking of bad memories, after I return to the dorms I receive a text, yet another surprising one that has me feeling somewhere between awkward and amused.

Matt: Sorry about today.

Me: What for?

Matt: Disrupting the movie.

Well, that definitely wasn't Matt's fault. He was forced to see a movie with someone that had ulterior motives. Out of all of us, he was probably the most uncomfortable.

Ah, that is true. I bite my lip. Should I ask?

I glance over to Tori's side of the room. He isn't even here. He's spending time with Chelsea again. It's easy to guess what they're doing. Pretty sure they're just friends with benefits. I'm not even sure if that'll change, but the point is, even when he isn't here I feel him being nosy.

Shaking my head, I work up the courage to ask.

Me: That wasn't your fault. Are you ok, though?

Matt: ???

I snicker. Wow, even in text he can find ways to not talk. Impressive.

Me: Amanda was just grabbing you without permission. Did it bother you? You ok?

I wait patiently, staring at the phone hovering above my face. Except Matt doesn't respond immediately like he has been. My fingers start sweating. Did I go too far? Maybe I shouldn't have asked. It's none of my business and, if he was bothered, he probably didn't want it—my phone goes off. I quickly open the message.

Matt: Fine. I'm used to it.

That doesn't make me feel better. Even if it makes sense. We've all seen scenes of celebrities walking through large crowds where they're grabbed or touched without their consent. Then Matt is coming to school where people

are constantly trying to befriend him. It's why he has to have a bodyguard, to avoid incidents like that, so why didn't he bring one today?

Wait, that's not my business! He probably doesn't want to be followed all the time, wants to do something normal. I don't know but it's not my business and we've been texting for too long anyways so, with a firm nod, I reply.

Me: That's good.

The moment I hit send I regret it. Fuck, wait, that doesn't sound right!

Me: I mean, that you're ok! Not the being used to being groped part

Me: Wait, not groped either, just touched

Me: That doesn't sound better. I'm sorry.

I drop my phone on my chest, staring at the ceiling that I wish would reach down to swallow me whole. Please, I'm an embarrassment to myself and the world. What the hell am I saying? Why did we talk for this long? Idiot. I'm a complete idiot.

Ding!

Damn. I'm too scared to look.

But, with a deep breath, I do and I'm even more surprised at the simple response. (Yet somehow it makes my heart skip a beat.)

Matt: lol

"Lol" should not make my heart skip. "Lol" is used to end a conversation or add to one that you aren't necessarily invested in. No one actually "laughs out loud" when they send that. Ok, yeah, this needs to end.

Me: Good luck on your review.

Matt: You too.

Setting my phone aside, I sit up with every intention to start the review. Except my cheeks are extraordinarily warm and, to make matters worse, the door swings open to show Tori with a shit eating grin and a very obvious hickey on his neck. However, it isn't his hickey that gets any attention.

"Hey, are you sick? Your face is super red."

"Ah, maybe," I cough. "M-My head kind of hurts."

But my head knows that to be a lie and my heart knows that I'm spewing some bullshit.

~

Early update cause I can, here ya go! lol Matt really is brutal, but also kind of super oblivious. I love my boys xD I warned ya, this stupid is ridiculous *throws confetti* So what did you think of the totally not movie date? How will Matt and Dana grow closer when one is a shy fool and the other is an oblivious fool? lol

8. Car Rides & Red Umbrella's

School days go by one after the other, each blending into the next. That's not necessarily a bad thing though. My phone now has a plethora of new numbers, Tori, Harper, Rose, Chelsea, Matt, and even Nick's (not crazy about the last two, but whatever). To think I'd be so excited about a few phone numbers, but until now mine has only had family and a few people from school that I would hang out with but not regularly.

We even have a group chat now between Tori, Rose, Chelsea and myself! Tori uses it mostly to post dumb meme's throughout the day that has all of us chuckling in the middle of class. I've learned to stop checking by now since I've gotten some annoyed glances from professors. But it's nice to have a place where the four of us talk, even if I'm not always an active participant.

Maybe it's stupid to find myself looking at my contact list and smiling but I can't help it. I'm making friends, and not the kind that I just give that title to in order to make myself feel better. No, because even in the last few days I've spent time with Tori, Chelsea and Rose during school hours. Once Harper even invited me out to eat with him and his jogging friends. Saying yes wasn't too bad of an idea even if all of them were rather rambunctious. I mostly stuck with Harper at the pizza joint, but it was enjoyable and I'm starting to feel more comfortable with people and crowds.

Yes, I'm still an anxious mess by the idea of it, but I'm learning to cope and handle some interaction from time to time. Then I need a break to recuperate, which is a lot more than what I've ever done. Maybe my college days really are looking up?

Even my schoolwork is going by well! I turned all my homework in, including the review for Freshman Seminar. Amanda did end up talking with Harper in order to finish hers. Matt seems to have finished his since he turned it in and, judging by their distance in class, he and Amanda haven't talked again. Can't blame either of them for that.

So I can conclude that my first three weeks of college has been great! Well, maybe not today, seeing as I just got off the worst shift I've ever had and it's pouring down rain and guess who doesn't have an umbrella? This unfortunate soul right here. Cue Ursula.

Scowling, I stare out the windows of Subway in my stinking work uniform to see rain drenching everything in sight. My plan is to wait except it keeps coming down and I'm exhausted. There were so many jerk customers today, and it was a freaking Sunday! Usually nothing happens on Sunday, but I had a lady come in and tell me, *"Make me a tuna sub with whatever you normally put on it."*

Then I proceeded to explain our damn slogan to her, *"Make it your own way,"* and that there's no freaking "normal" way to make a sandwich. She didn't like that and my manager got called, who explained the same thing so, thanks for being a bitch, stupid lady! Then I dumped an entire batch of onions on myself, had to remake them, burnt some cookies and slipped in the backroom. Now it's raining and I'm tired, cranky, and smell like shit so cut me a break here!

Seems that won't happen though. The rain keeps coming and I've been here for 15 extra minutes. I could buy an umbrella at the gas station. By then I'll be soaked anyways, and it's not like I need an umbrella. I have one but didn't bring it today since the weather said it wasn't going to rain! Never trust the weather.

Well, I need a bath anyways. Heading to the back, I grab a plastic bag to put my wallet and phone in. It's only a 15 minutes walk. With a heavy sigh, I step outside to leave. I wait under the awning just a few moments longer in hopes it'll stop but it doesn't—

Then my phone rings.

I jump in surprise, wondering what Mom is doing already calling. She always makes sure to call on the weekends so I reach back to pull my phone out of my pocket but it isn't Mom.

It's Matt.

Matt's...calling me? What? Why? Should I answer? I'd feel like a jerk for ignoring, especially since he has never called me. It's almost worrying. Maybe he butt dialed or something.

Curiosity gets the best of me. Biting my lip, I answer hesitantly, "H-Hello?"

"Do you need a ride?" Matt asks immediately, which has me furrowing my brow.

"W-What? How?" I spin my head from side to side then spot a familiar black Mercedes parked a little ways down the street. It's obviously Matt.

"I was heading to get food and saw you standing there without an umbrella," Matt explains without my even having to ask. That makes sense. There's only two roads on or off campus and this road leads to most of the restaurants nearby.

"Oh, uh—" Shit, what do I say? If I say no, it makes me seem like I don't want to get in his car. That's totally untrue because it's a Mercedes that I will never be able to afford in my life so, yes, let me see the inside of the car. At the same time..."I c-completely reek."

Matt actually snorts.

"I'm serious. Have you smelled the back of a Subway?"

"No."

"It's awful."

"I guess I'm about to find out. Let me turn around."

"A-Ah, you don't have to! I can just run to you."

Wait, that means I agreed to the ride. Have I decided yet though? I don't think so. But it's too late, Matt repeats that he'll drive around the block then hangs up. I'm too shocked to do anything other than stand there with my phone pressed to my ear like a weirdo.

What the hell is happening? Now he's giving me a ride although we haven't talked in over a week and we don't really talk at all. Isn't he worried? What if I, like, pull out a knife or try to steal from him? Sure, he could destroy me with a flick of his finger, but that's not the point! Don't give strangers car rides! I feel like a mother having to lecture a kid.

Matt pulls up right in front of me moments later. There's a brief second where I consider just bolting but feel like a complete jackass at the mere thought...plus I really want to see the inside of the car. The windows are tinted. It looks so damn nice on the outside. I bet the inside is leather and probably hi-tech. It probably smells nice and doesn't have a scratch or dent.

Oh, screw it!

I end up rushing to the door, flinging it up and sliding inside.

Yep, the car is just as gorgeous on the inside. No dirt. No dust. No scratches. Pristine as pristine can be. There's beige seats with black linings and one of those screens that lets you see when you back up. An obviously purchased and custom radio with even Matt's initials engraved into the center of the steering wheel, which has me chuckling because his initials are "MJ."

"What?" Matt asks curiously.

"Y-Your initials."

"Ah." Seems he is aware. "Michael Jackson."

I nod vigorously and am very shocked to see Matt's lips twitch back into that faint smile again. Please don't do that.

Ah, his hair is different today too. Normally it has an almost tousled look, but today he hasn't put anything in it, I think. Seems his hair is naturally straight since it's brushing over his eyes and the tips of his ears. Not that I care about his hair or anything...

"You're heading back to the dorms, right?" Matt inquires making me realize that he offered me a ride without knowing where I was heading.

"O-Oh, yeah...but what would you have done if I wasn't?"

"I would have taken you anyway."

"What if it was super far?"

"Then we'd have a long drive."

I tilt my head to the side in confusion while Matt doesn't seem to see the issue with what he said. He's already pulling back onto the road, driving around the block again to head in the opposite direction towards the dorms. He really isn't what I expected. Then again, I'm not sure what I was expecting seeing as I never expected to be in this situation.

Because of that, the ride is silent. The thing is though, I wouldn't call it awkward. Matt looks relaxed beside me even if his expression sort of says otherwise. I'm starting to think that Matt has two modes; resting bitch face and bored. Maybe he's expressionless to save it all for the big screen, who knows! But his body language states he's fine. He isn't tense like he was at the movies. And, looking to the hands in my lap, I'm not tense either.

The only thing that bothers me is the knowledge that I won't ever see the inside of a nice car like this again. That lucky bastard owns it. Some people make me so mad!

Matt pulls up to the dorms moments later. In my case I still have to run a bit through the rain since my dorm hall is behind the one at the front. It won't take long but, just as I'm about to say my goodbye, Matt suddenly reaches into the back. I watch curiously when he hands me a red umbrella.

"Here," he says while sitting it in my lap.

He's just giving it to me?

"It's ok! I can run. I won't get that wet." I shake my hands through the air. Grabbing the umbrella, I try to hand it back, but like the time with the

envelope, Matt won't even move to take it.

"Why would you do that when I'm offering you an umbrella?"

"Because you need it?"

"I have a car."

"But you said you were getting food so you have to get out."

"For a second. Just use that. It's fine."

I would argue, but I get the feeling Matt won't let me say no even if I really tried. I've never been good at persuasion. So, with a nervous nod, I say, "Ok...I'll give it back?"

"Ok."

Nodding again, I push open the car door and open the umbrella before stepping out. My stomach is squirming nervously. Just when I'm about to shut the door, Matt calls, "Dana!"

I lean over to peer back in, flushing furiously when I see Matt giving me a teasing smile.

"You're right though."

"H-Huh?" I ask.

"Subway's backroom smells awful."

I lower my head in embarrassment while Matt chuckles. The sound tickles my ears and I'm ok with the light joke simply because I heard him chuckle, which makes me feel like an idiot, but hey, that's nothing new!

"I'll see you tomorrow," he says.

"S-See you tomorrow."

Quickly, I shut the door and speed off towards the dorms, looking back only once to see Matt's car still sitting there. I hesitate, watching the black car waiting in the rain with Matt likely watching quietly behind the tinted window. There goes my heart again, skipping a beat. To make matters worse, Matt doesn't leave until I've disappeared behind the building to get to my own.

The moment I'm inside and the umbrella is down, I press my back to the nearest wall and slide to the floor. Who cares who sees me, I'm having a crisis!

What the hell just happened?

I've been asking that far too much lately. And it usually always has to do with Matt, which makes it worse because... *what the hell just happened?!*

Seeing the red umbrella in my grasp suddenly makes my heart flutter. How can such a simple gesture make me act like this? What an idiot! Matt's probably just being nice since I haven't given out his number or tried to jump him like other people, right?

Except my heart is screaming at me that it wouldn't mind jumping him. Well fuck you, that isn't ok and we aren't going through with it so step back.

Whatever, doesn't matter. I'll give this stupid umbrella back tomorrow and that'll be the end of it. I will purchase one of those little compacting umbrellas immediately and store it in my backpack at all times to avoid this type of situation again. Although I doubt it will happen again. Once in a lifetime is enough and, well, we aren't friends so he wouldn't offer this regularly, right?

Right. Obviously.

~

THEY'RE SO CUTE *flips table* do you agree or do you agree? (see, you can't disgaree because you'd be FUCKING LYING!) Anyways,

happy Monday, hope you had a nice weekend and enjoyed this adorable update!

9. Check Before You Text

"Dana, I'm so sorry for asking you to come in this morning."

"It's all right. We were just supposed to work on a project today in class, which I already finished so I would have skipped anyways."

Martha laughs, shaking her head while tying her hair up. She called early this morning, saying two workers called off sick and no one else was responding so I happily came in to pick up a shift. Although I will be leaving early to get to my second Tuesday class. That means I won't be able to return Matt's umbrella today since we won't see each other, but I doubt he'll mind.

So, with only two workers, Martha and I open the store for the early students and hungry office workers. One by one people start piling in for some breakfast. The shop is filled with yawns and tired eye rubs, myself included. Well, not so much the eye rubbing considering I am working with food, but a lot of turning my head to yawn over my shoulder for sure. Morning shifts are rough, even if I always work them on the weekends.

The line is rather long considering how early it is, but it's understandable with only two of us. I rush to get as much done as I can, happy that customers aren't trying to converse. I may smile but that's part of my job. I'm not actually interested in talking with strangers. It gives me the shivers so with so many realizing we're rushing at least that makes many keep their mouths shut and just go, go, go.

Then the customers start to dwindle down and it's much more calm. Now some are trying to small talk, which results in some forced laughter and awkward smiles from me. Which only worsens when a familiar face walks in, head down and earbuds in with a bodyguard in toe.

W-W-What is Matt doing here? I guess it is almost time for class, but shouldn't he be eating caviar or lobster? I don't know, that's ridiculous for

anyone to have for breakfast, but please, for my sake, be ridiculous!

"Crap!" I shout when I drop an entire bottle of mayonnaise on the floor. Martha jumps in shock from the sound. The bottle basically exploded, now there's mayonnaise everywhere.

"I'll clean it up, keep the line moving," Martha orders, rushing in the back to grab a mop.

Of course the noise garnered all the customer's attention, including Matt's. I'm not surprised to catch him looking at me, although I'm curious why he looks shocked to see me here. He knows I work here, he gave me a ride. Whatever, I can't think about it. It's just me so I gotta keep moving.

Three customers go by. Martha has managed to clean up my mess and ring them out while Matt finally steps up. His earbuds are hanging around his neck now.

I can't lie about feeling awkward when I ask, "What can I get for you?"

Just when Matt is about to answer, a new voice cuts in. A man that has just come into the store, dressed in some nice jeans and a button down. All he does is call Matt's name, obviously earning our attention as he comes over with his phone held out. It isn't until he's closer, having pushed past those in line, that I see his screen. He's recording audio.

"Matthew Jeneviere, right? Would you mind talking to me for just a few minutes?" The man asks and is immediately pushed back by a titan stepping between them, Matt's bodyguard. When he crosses his arms he somehow seems to grow causing everyone to give an audible gulp.

"Ah, I-I work for a local paper. H-Here, my card." The man reaches into his back pocket in a rush, pulling out a card that he tries to hand to Matt, but the bodyguard gives a death glare. I give the reporter credit. He has the guts to slide the card between the guards arms, which earns him a raised brow. "It won't take long, I promise."

"Dude, we're all trying to get something to eat, move out of the way!" A patron shouts, another follows after him complaining about class. Now Martha's attention is grabbed. She was checking out a few more customers but her eyes are now narrowed on the reporter causing a scene.

Matt ends up letting out a heavy sigh. He taps the back of his bodyguard's shoulder then walks to a table across the room. The bodyguard scoffs, finally letting the reporter past him, following him to the table where they speak in hushed voices that I can't hear. However, when I get the chance, I glance over out of the corner of my eye.

Matt is clearly uncomfortable, sitting at the table with his arms crossed and lips set into a firm line. His eyes are closed and, again, he's picking at his fingernails, constantly flicking at his thumbnail or simply scratching them. But it's clear that the reporter isn't getting the answers he wants, or any since I haven't seen Matt's lips move much at all.

Is he just talking to him so everyone can get their food in peace? But that isn't fair. Matt should be able to get a meal without being bothered too. Everyone should have the common sense to leave him be when he's trying to eat breakfast (or just in general, come on, give him a break). Who the hell does that guy think he is anyway? Coming running in here to bug a student, what a jerk!

Matt suddenly stands. The bodyguard is keeping the reporter back, but his voice is rising so all can hear. "Everyone has a lot of questions about your sudden absence. Is it true you went to rehab?"

The store falls silent, all turn to the reporter that is immediately pushed away from Matt.

"That's enough. You're lucky to have gotten the time that you did. Get out of here," the bodyguard snarls in a deep voice, pressing the reporter farther and farther back.

"It's been two years since that party and you haven't said a word!"

Then, as if someone suddenly turned on the faucet, whispers start flowing from one person to the next.

"Oh yeah, two years ago, there was that big drug bust at some celebs party."

"Matt was one of them?"

Matt's shoulders are stiff. Even from here I spot his hands turning into fists in his pants pockets.

"So he's just another drugged up celebrity? Eh, I wish my life was so miserable that I had a Mercedes."

"What a waste of talent."

"Sir!" I shout, not realizing I have done so until the reporter is looking at me in confusion.

Cool, I'm confused too, and now very worried because the entire store is focused on me, even Matt. I refuse to look at him though when my hands start to shake beneath the counter.

"I-If you aren't g-g-going to purchase a-anything...then you n-need to leave. You're m-making the customers un-uncomfortable and causing a scene."

"Huh?"

"I said...y-you are making everyone uncomfortable so, i-if you a-aren't buying anything then leave."

The reporter furrows his brows in annoyance. "Fine, I'll get something in a minute."

"No," Martha chimes in, standing next to me with a heavy sigh. "Order something now or get out of here. We've all put up with you long enough."

The reporter scoffs, stepping back with clear annoyance in his eyes until the bodyguard clears his throat. Then he looks up with wide eyes, realizing that

he is far more scared of him than us, and finally sputters out, "Ok, ok, I'll get something now."

It's actually funny how everyone let's him step first in line just to get him out of here. However, once he's standing in front of me, Matt leaves. I barely have enough time to see him walk by before he's out the door with his guard right behind. Of course the moment the bell is heard Mr. Idiot Reporter is looking around like a prairie dog, realizing his scoop is gone then running after him.

"What a jackass," Martha mutters under her breath then gets back to work.

Sadly, so do I. But my mind can't get off Matt for the rest of the day.

Is he ok? Because he didn't seem to be. Having someone trying to pry into my personal life, even if it seems like most people are aware of whatever this incident was two years ago, would bother me to no end.

After work I'm tempted to message him, but I don't know what to say. Should I ask? I don't even know what I'm asking about because this incident from two years ago is not something I'm aware of. I don't want to look it up either.

In the end, I say nothing. Matt never messages me either, not that I expect him to, but it further cements the thought that I shouldn't ask. However, that doesn't stop the reporter from getting out an article the very next day that becomes the talk of the school. Matt doesn't show up. I don't blame him. Suddenly, I can't avoid the story at all.

"He must have gotten out of rehab and came to school to keep him on the DL."

"I bet his mom was furious. Isn't she some hot shot business woman? Something Beauty, right? Her company took a big drop in sales after that giant ass drugs bust."

"It's not surprising, I bet every celebrity shoots up with something. Matt probably still does, rehab is totally a cover up story."

I end up listening to music for most of the day, not wanting to hear anymore of it. Especially considering all these people are the ones that are supposedly Matt's friends. I don't think friends should be talking behind their friends backs. Then lunch rolls around and, of course, Tori tries to interrogate me.

"Tell us what happened," he says the moment he takes a seat at the lunch table.

"What?"

"You were working yesterday morning, right? So you were there while that reporter was interviewing Matt." Tori grins from ear to ear at having managed to put it together. "Was Joey with him? Did he beat the guy up? Tell us the details!"

Joey? Must be the bodyguard. The name is even bodyguard-esque. How'd Tori find out though?

"There's no details."

Chelsea and Rose actually look disappointed. Did they want to hear a story about Joey (I'm calling him that unless proven otherwise) beating up a reporter? I guess I would have liked to see that too but, no, that isn't what happened.

"What do you mean no details? Did you not snoop on their conversation?"

"I'm not you."

Tori gasps. "Are you saying I'm nosy?"

"Yes."

Tori places a hand over his heart. "You cut me deep."

"I was working. The reporter came in and tried to talk with him, that was it." That was all I planned to say at least. Not that I have any more to tell. What everyone has been whispering about is the only reason I know much

of anything, and I use know very little since I doubt that reporter or anyone here actually knows the truth.

"Next time, get us some deets," Tori says with a scowl. "I want to snoop."

"Maybe you should be a reporter then," Rose teases then kindly pats my arm. "Besides, Dana probably wouldn't have understood what was said anyway."

"Yea-hey!" I pout. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you probably don't even know what article came out today, let alone what was happening years ago. Do you even know about the scandal?"

"I...well...a little." Which I only learned about today and Rose must see that based on my expression because she giggles.

"Typical celebrity drama that actually turned into political drama. Matt got busted with some other young and upcoming celebs at a huge party with lots and lots of drugs and alcohol and probably unprotected sex. No one knows who called it in though, considering high celebs aren't exactly a crazy thing to see so there's all these questions of who did it and why since, actually, what real shit went down was MiaCon having a bunch of their shady business dealings getting busted during the raid. It's like a real life drama!"

"And MiaCon worked, or was affiliated with, Forever Beauty, which is owned by Matt's mom. There was talk that MiaCon was messing with her kids because of some bad business deals, then that she was involved with the dealings or was helping Matt get drugs off them, something, something." Chelsea waved her hands wildly through the air. "It was a big scandal, no one has all the answers and Matt hid for two years probably in hopes to move past it, but well, that didn't work out very well, did it?"

"You're not exactly helping," Tori says, but he's smiling so it's obvious he's happy to be in on the info.

"Like you wouldn't have googled this later to be in the loop."

"True, true."

I kind of wish they hadn't said anything. I don't like gossip. Gossip reminds me of that game my teacher made us play in elementary school. She'd take the class, line us up and whisper something to the first kid then they'd whisper what was said to the next and down it went until we all heard what the last person said, which was never the same as when it began. Because that's how people and gossip works; we tell a story that is morphed and twisted until it becomes something it never was.

I'm sure whatever happened with Matt is the same, especially when I doubt anyone other than him and those directly involved actually know the truth. Hopefully he's not online or checking his phone. Hopefully he's sitting at home watching Netflix or playing video games, something away from all the drama. I doubt it's any good for him.

Not that it's any of my business. It's just, he seems like a nice guy. He doesn't deserve this kind of attention, that's why. I just feel bad because of that. Now I feel like I should message him, at least to ask that he's ok. So while the others talk, I pull out my phone to quickly text beneath the table.

Me: *Hey, what's up?*

Why would I ask what's up? That's stupid. Delete!

Me: *Hi, it's Dana.*

Of course he knows it's me. Delete! Ok, let's keep it simple. Just ask how he is!

Me: *How are you?*

And delete again because somehow that sounds formal. How does it sound formal? What the hell is wrong with me? I can do this. Just text what I want to say. If it bothers him, he won't answer, or he will and I'll realize that I made him feel worse. Shit. Ok, I got this. It's fine. I can text. I'm a functioning...person?

Me: *Hey Matt, I hope everything is ok. I'm really sorry about yesterday. I wish I would have kicked him out sooner. You didn't deserve that, and if you need to talk about it, I'm more than happy to listen.*

I regret it the moment I send it, staring wide-eyed at the last sentence in particular. I'm more than happy to listen about a personal matter of a celebrity that has probably been told that before and had their trust betrayed? What kind of egotistical maniac am I? Idiot! Abort, abort!

Me: *Not that you have any reason to tell me. We don't really know each other so obviously you don't have to, just know that you can since I won't tell, not that I'm saying you would expect me to tell. It's just nice to know there's someone, although I'm sure you already have someone. You're a popular guy!*

What am I saying? Why do I keep pushing send? That is way worse than the first one! He's going to think I'm an idiot. Actually, he probably already thinks I am one. Damn it.

Me: *Shit, I'm so sorry, idk what I'm saying. I hope everything is ok. Ok, that's all.*

My phone is immediately shoved into my pocket and forgotten about for the remainder of the day. I refuse to look, although by the lack of noise or vibration I can guess that Matt didn't respond anyways. That's good, or maybe it isn't. I'm not so sure, and I try my best to forget about it until later that night when I'm doing homework and my phone lights up. By then I'm not even thinking about Matt's response though so my eyes go wide when I see he has finally answered.

Matt: *I should be the one apologizing, sorry for having put everyone in that situation. I'm ok though. Figured it'd be best to take a day. See you tomorrow.*

See you tomorrow? He's coming to school tomorrow? If I were him, I would definitely stay home and hope the drama dies down by Monday.

I don't say that though. I don't really know what to say. Should I tell him not to apologize either? Because he isn't the one that put anyone in an uncomfortable situation, it was the reporter that did it. But I suck at talking in real life so through text is even worse.

Me: *Yeah, that was probably best. See you tomorrow then.*

Matt doesn't respond and I'm not sure if I wanted him to or not. In the end, I go to bed thinking it would probably have been better not to have messaged him at all.

~

YOU DID YOUR BEST, DANA! Our cute boy stood up for Matt to that jerk reporter! What do you guys think about the rumors? Is there more to Matt's past and what could it be?

10. The Danger of Eye Smiles

"Why do you have an umbrella?" Tori asks Thursday morning.

I'm awkwardly waiting outside the class we share with Matt. He said he'd be here today, although if I were him I wouldn't come. There's still gossip. I've already heard some today, people whispering, making bets on whether Matt shows up or not.

I doubt he cares about this stupid umbrella anyways, or if he even remembers, but I need to give it back. So my only option is to wait outside until he gets here in hopes to return it before the mob forms. Today will likely be worse than usual, or maybe people will leave him alone so they can whisper about him. Who knows!

"I have to give this back. I borrowed it," I explain, hoping that Tori won't ask, but obviously he does because he's Tori.

"From who?"

"Someone."

"The fact that you won't say who is very suspicious."

"Maybe you're just too nosy."

"I am very nosy, but that doesn't make your reactions any less sus—" Tori suddenly starts to grin from ear to ear. "It's Matt's, isn't it?"

"No!"

"When did he give you an umbrella? You two are getting chummy."

"I said no!"

Tori gives me a once over of obvious disbelief. "You answered it too quickly. We share a class today and you brought it so it's Matt's. Since you two are getting close, where the hell is my autograph?"

"You're just going to sell it."

"Obviously."

"And we aren't chummy!"

Tori snorts. "I don't see him giving an umbrella to anyone else."

"Please, it's not that big of a deal."

Except we both know it is considering how antisocial Matt has been up to this point. Not that I blame him, nor can I say much considering I'm not the most social of beings either. The texts we have shared, especially last night, have proved as much. Still, Tori looks way too pleased and he even tries to stick around in order to see the so called "golden interaction" between Matt and me.

I start beating him with the umbrella so he gets the picture to leave. After a few more acts of abuse, Tori runs into class cackling while I wait patiently with my back against the wall. Students walk into class one after the other. Some are quiet, others are mentioning Matt. I frown when one guy in particular snickers about how he hopes the rumors help "put that snob in his place."

Snob? The only snobby one here is you! If only I had the guts to say that.

"Dana, what are you doing?"

I jump and spin on my heel to find Matt standing right next to me with Joey a few steps behind. Matt's phone is in his hand and headphones around his neck. Those thin blue eyes of his, that I swore were always cold and glaring before, somehow appear warm and comforting now. Is something wrong with me for thinking that way? Absolutely.

But I don't even have time to panic about my own thoughts when I hear someone in class start to say, "I wonder if anyone is going to ask Matt about the art—"

"Thank you!" I scream so loud that it actually hurts me a bit to do so. Even Matt jumps in shock.

"Thanks for the umbrella is what I wanted to say, y'know, from the other day." I hold out said umbrella, which Matt hesitantly takes.

The girls are no longer talking but I'm not risking it.

"Now, you should put your headphones back on." I grab the headphones around his neck and have to lean up on my tiptoes to place them back over his ears. Surprisingly, Matt lets me, but he's definitely staring in utter confusion. That's fine. I am very confused too. We can be confused together! "Ok, that's better, that's good, uh...thanks, thanks again."

Before Matt can say a word about whatever the hell that was, I'm rushing into class to sit next to Tori.

"I didn't know you could move that fast," Tori whispers, watching me with amusement then looking to Matt standing outside the door with his umbrella. When he peers into the room I can see the same confusion on his face but choose to ignore it.

Listen, spending the least amount of time with Matt is for my own safety. The best option was to give the umbrella back and bolt, especially when I know many students would kill to have been given the same opportunity, even with that stupid article. I rather not have those students actually kill me though, thanks.

And let's not even talk about the headphones thing. What an idiot, I'm getting worse by the day.

Sighing, I lean onto my desk. Why did he come today? He should at least stay home until Monday, give the school a few days to forget about the article and move on. I don't know how he can show his face during a time

like this. Guess it goes to show our differences. I'd be on the floor practically dead after only a smidge of the attention he gets.

I take a risk and peer up from my buried position only to find Matt glancing at me over his shoulder. His eyes widen, so do mine, then I look away, unsure if Matt did too. Ok, so I risk checking to see he isn't looking, which has Tori whistling again.

"You two are being very weird," he says, swinging his head from side to side.

I smack him upside his swinging head. "What do you mean?"

"You keep looking at each other. Is something going on that I have not been informed of?"

"Stop asking."

"I can't. I must know. I hate not knowing everything."

"And that is going to get you into a lot of trouble one day."

"But all that I know will get me right back out of it." Tori pokes me teasingly, grinning from ear to ear. I can't help but smile back. He's contagious like that.

Sadly, the smile doesn't last long. When class ends and we're all leaving, I hear the same whispers start right back up. Only this time my eyes fixate on Matt, who stiffens in his seat. His headphones are around his neck. He can clearly hear people mumbling, trying to get their friends to interrogate Matt about whatever they're curious about. It has me narrowing my eyes.

Then Matt abruptly stands. The desk scrapes against the floor. He swings his bag over his shoulder but doesn't leave. For a moment, he looks back and I think he's looking at someone behind me, but turning around I don't see anyone there. When I face him again, Matt is already gone, waltzing out the door with his headphones on and phone in hand. The crew follows, scurrying to pursue their idol. It's actually sad.

"Like I said, weird," Tori sings next to me, earning himself a glare.

Except I'm about to believe him since only a second later my phone buzzes. I pull it out, thinking it's a group text or something only to find it's from Matt. My eyes widen.

Matt: *Want to skip?*

Huh and a who and a what now? Skip? As in skip class...together?

I get why he wants to leave, but why me? I scratch at the back of my neck. This is a conundrum. I was just thinking the best thing to do was to not associate with Matt. He's always in the spotlight and I can't handle the spotlight. That one week after the cafeteria incident was enough attention to last me a lifetime!

Another text comes in.

Matt: *We can catch a movie or something, my treat*

Now he's throwing a free movie into the deal? That's cheating. But the more I stare at the text, the more I feel like it'd be rude or make me seem like a jackass if I say no. He's asking for a reason. I'm not sure why it's me, but if I were him I'd feel like such an idiot if he said no. Then again, I would be too nervous to ask. Why am I like this? Why can't I be a jerk and say no? Come on, it's so easy. It is two letters, type N then O and send.

Which is not what I do, obviously.

Me: *Sure. I'm paying for myself though lol*

Matt: *Ok. Meet me in the parking garage by the elevator, third floor.*

At least I don't have Tori in my next class, it makes skipping easier. He'll probably message me around lunch when he realizes I'm not there, but that's fine. I can easily lie. As if I'd tell that nosy bastard I'm about to go see a movie with the campus heartthrob. Even I don't think it's real. Something is going to happen, like the apocalypse. Is a meteor about to hit? Maybe I'm dead, or this is a coma?

Who knows for sure. Whatever kind of weird reality this is, it doesn't end. I get to the parking garage to find Matt waiting. He has a hat on again, tipped down to hide his face with his hands in his pockets. Joey is nowhere to be seen. Must have left already? I almost wish he was here because now we're actually alone. It's just the two of us. Why?

Too late to ask now. Matt spots me and offers up a smile that I can't help but smile back at. Oh no. That's not good. Smiling because he's smiling, this is dangerous territory.

"Are you really ok with skipping?" Matt asks as I follow him to his car.

"Yeah, I-I don't really have much to worry about today."

"Hmm."

"W-What about you?" That wasn't phrased well, it's like half my question.

"What about me?"

Matt unlocks the doors and we both slip in. I sit my backpack in the backseat. He starts the car just as I ask, "Uh, asking to skip, does it have to do with the article?"

"Yeah. People are annoying."

I snort, which has Matt cocking a brow then I full on laugh and he starts to stare at me like I'm crazy.

"What's so funny?" He asks.

"You're really blunt."

"It's the truth."

"Yeah, but most people at least try to sugarcoat it."

"That's stupid."

I laugh even harder. "That makes you funnier."

Matt must not take offense seeing as he smiles while pulling out of the garage.

"Do you want to go to the movies, or is there something else you'd rather do?" Matt asks. We're still on campus so it'd be easy to make different plans, but I shake my head.

"A movie is fine. Is there one you haven't seen though?"

Matt shakes his head.

"Why go if you've seen them all?"

"I like movies. I can watch them again."

I hum in response, the both of us falling silent immediately afterwards. I don't know if I'd call the atmosphere awkward, but it's not overly friendly either. The sort of silence that happens with strangers on a bus or a train. They're there. You don't speak. You're just co-existing in the same space for the time being.

Except in this case, Matt asked me to come. He's not a stranger on a bus or train. He's a guy sitting next to me, taking us both to the movies because he wanted to skip and that confuses me. Not the skipping part, but the skipping with me part. I want to ask. The question is tickling the back of my throat, but whenever I glance at Matt out of the corner of my eye, I get nervous.

He really does have a resting bitch face. There's certain features that naturally give off intimidating vibes. Matt has eyes that could freeze the ocean and his jawline is sharp, like you'd cut yourself if you attempted even a hit. Although he doesn't give off an air of annoyance or discomfort, the look is certainly there.

"Want to listen to music?" He asks, breaking the silence.

"Uh, sure."

"What do you like?"

"Anything other than country."

Matt smirks. "Good to know."

His car has the radio options on his steering wheel so he turns it on with ease. Then his phone lights up from the grip it's sitting in and he puts on an alternative playlist. I recognize the first song immediately, bobbing my head along to the song Tip Toes by half•alive.

"You know them?" Matt asks.

"Yeah, I pre-ordered their new album."

"Same. What's your favorite song?"

"This one." I laugh, still swaying to the beat. Maybe it's the music, or maybe it's the sudden comfort in the air, but I find myself saying, "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

I roll my eyes.

"Shoot," he says.

"Why did you ask me to skip with you?"

Matt tilts his head.

"I know why you wanted to skip, but why with me?" I point to myself nervously. "You have a lot of friends."

"Do I?" Matt snorts. "I have a lot of followers, you mean."

That's true and I know that, but I was kind of hoping Matt had at least someone among them that he considered a friend.

"I asked you because you're not annoying," he says like that explains anything.

"That is a low standard to have. I don't know if it's a compliment."

"It is. You see how people act around me. They smile at my face and talk behind my back. Some may actually want to be friends, but that's because they have an idea of me already in their heads that they want me to live up to. When I don't, they'll be disappointed and I'll be the bad guy. It happens all the time."

My stomach drops. That's the most Matt has ever said to me and it ends up being super depressing.

"We met on accident. You offered to pay me back because you wanted to, not because you wanted my attention. You have my number but never bother me; you haven't even given it out." He glances at me with a soft smile. "At least I'm assuming you haven't. There's been no odd messages lately."

"I haven't. I would never!"

"That's why I asked you." Matt nods then starts to frown. "Ah, did I bother you?"

"No!" I shout, earning a surprised expression from Matt that then turns into a smile when I wave my hand frantically in the air. "That's not—I was just curious. I'm fine with us hanging out—oh, not because of the you being an actor thing, just, in general. I-It's—I'm fine with it."

What the hell was that? Someone, please end me.

Matt laughs, nothing like a bent over in tears sort of vibe, just a simple warmth that tickles the ears to hear. And when he smiles like that, his eyes kind of smile too.

"Happy to hear it," he says between his laughter. "Now, what movie do you want to watch?"

Right...the movie. I really don't know. It's hard to think with my heart beat ringing in my ears. Oh no, I think I'm in serious trouble.

~

Dana, your awkwardness is showing. Matt, you are also awkward. The title is fitting, isn't it? ;D Now time for the date--ah, I mean, skipping class. Yes, yes, that's all it is. How do you suppose "skipping class" will go? ^^

11. Panic! at the Hand Holding

We're at the theater and Matt keeps his gaze low. Neither of us really say anything until we get to the counter where I pay for my own ticket and a drink. Matt insists he gets the popcorn since it was his idea. I let him slide on that, however, as we're standing there I look to the man behind the counter and ask, "May we have separate bags? Like half in one and half in the other."

That earns me an incredulous look. Matt is probably doing the same, but says nothing when the guy agrees and gives us our popcorn as requested. I smile nervously when he hands me mine then scurry away.

Sorry, but all I can think about is every cheesy romance movie ever made where we reach into our shared popcorn bowl and hold hands so, yeah, I want separate bags for the popcorn. There will be no accidental hand holding!

The theater isn't crowded so we find our seats easily. Matt sits on my right and we're early enough that the trailers haven't even started yet. There's just those weird and boring questionnaires about movies, but maybe they aren't so weird or boring because Matt knows the answers to them.

"It's C," he says, pointing to the answer 'Betelgeuse' on screen asking what character Michael Keaton played in Beetlejuice. I'm about to comment about the movie being called Beetlejuice when it pops up that he was right. He smirks at me.

"I thought the movie was Beetlejuice?" I ask, scrunching my nose up in confusion.

"It is, but the character is Betelgeuse. He's named after a star."

"Then why is the movie called Beetlejuice?"

"Because the studio didn't like the proper spelling, but Tim Burton hated their options so they went with how his name was described in the movie since it's funny and appeals to a younger audience."

"You know some really odd movie facts."

Matt shrugs, but now I'm curious. What other unusual movie facts does Matt know? So I lean over and say, "Tell me another."

"Another what?"

"Movie trivia."

Matt snorts. "Why?"

"Why not?"

Matt hums for a moment then says, "In the original Halloween, Jamie Lee Curtis just wore her own clothes. They didn't have enough money to afford having on set costumes for them, and the leaves you see blowing around? They'd just rake them up after a take and keep them in a bag to use again later."

My jaw drops. Matt shows off a toothy smile; seemingly very pleased with his movie trivia. I immediately smile back when he starts to share more until the trailers start. But honestly, I wouldn't mind sitting around talking about movies with Matt for hours. He really does enjoy them. I understand why he's into acting now, although I can see him being a producer or a director at some point as well.

The movie begins and only ten minutes in, catastrophe happens.

I reach for my drink when a hand suddenly grabs mine. I find Matt's hand atop mine and when we look up, our eyes meet. My cheeks are so hot I'm surprised the theater isn't set ablaze. Matt only blinks rapidly in confusion.

But I even made us get different popcorn bags so this wouldn't happen, what the hell?!

"Uh, sorry," Matt whispers, quickly pulling away. "I'm left handed so it's kinda natural for me."

"I-It's fine."

No. No it's not fine. Nothing is fine, Dana, because your heart is about to explode. I'm surprised I'm not already dead. Is it really hot in here? Because it feels really hot, and no matter how much I drink it doesn't cool me down or quench my thirst. Oh no, no, no, this is not good. Not good at all. Why the hell did I agree to skip? Why?!

I barely pay any attention to the movie. It's over in the blink of an eye and I'm left wondering what the hell we just watched. Matt, on the other hand, stands when the credits roll on. I rush to follow him out of the theater, hoping that he won't really want to discuss—

"Did you like it?"

"Huh?" I ask.

"The movie."

Shit, I barely paid attention to it and Matt is waiting so patiently for an answer. I smile nervously and nod, "Yeah...did you? You saw it already, right?"

"Yeah. Not my favorite, typical storyline and character development, but overall an ok movie."

"Wow, what a critic."

Matt snickers when he shrugs. "Want to walk around a bit?" He checks his phone. "It's almost noon, or we can grab something to eat now?"

"I'm ok with walking around. We just had all that popcorn."

Matt nods and so our silent walk begins. I'm not sure what to say. I don't talk a lot naturally and Matt, well, I think he's even worse than me. I wouldn't call our quiet walk uncomfortable though. It's kind of nice

actually, just heading to different shops and seeing Matt pick out a shirt or pair of jeans he likes, learning what he likes by doing so, and I guess the same goes for me. It's getting to know someone without asking questions, just by watching them interact with what's around them.

But it seems we've spent too much time here because, suddenly, Matt stops. I glance back at him, ready to ask what's wrong when he lowers the bill of his hat even more. A group of girls sneak into the shop with their phones out, looking all about until easily spotting Matt. I can guess without hearing that they spotted Matt and at least suspect who he is, but none have walked over yet.

"We should go," says Matt with a heavy sigh.

"Guess it is a good time to grab something to eat, huh?"

Matt gently presses his hand against my back. I bite the inside of my cheek as we power walk our way out of the store. Sure enough, the girls follow, but their group gets a bit bigger when more people get involved. Matt groans then grabs my hand and runs without question.

I nearly fall flat on my face due to the sudden pace, but Matt's tight hold on my hand keeps me up. It's then, as we're running, that I not only feel but also notice Matt holding my hand.

Holy shit, he's holding my hand.

Sure, we're running right now, but he's holding my hand while running. I'm holding hands with Matthew Jeneviere, someone send help. Panic!

Except I can't really panic, at least not about the hand holding right now. We're rushing through the crowd, hearing those behind us trying to keep up, but Matt speeds down a hall then onto the escalator. He brushes by people with ease, apologizing each time as he does. I would laugh if I wasn't actually terrified of the mob catching up and the fact that we are still holding hands. I say we, but really Matt is holding onto me and I'm just tagging along because, fuck, what the hell is going on?!

Then we're running out the front door to his car. By the time the car is started, there are people standing outside the mall doors searching for him, but Matt is pulling out of the lot and heading onto the road before anyone even notices his car.

It happened so fast that it isn't until we're on the road that I can panic about the hand holding. Although he let go once we were in the car, I can't help but notice how warm my hand feels or how fast my heart is racing. I could easily pass that off as a result of the running, but I know it's a bit of both.

Crap. Keep it together, Dana. There's no point getting worked up about some hand holding, who cares?!

Apparently me, because my cheeks are warm. My heart won't calm down and my hands are shaking a bit in my lap. My cheeks start to hurt when I feel myself holding back a smile, which doesn't work. I end up smiling, probably like a lunatic.

"Sorry about that," Matt mumbles apologetically.

"It's ok."

I start to laugh, which has Matt glancing at me from the corner of his eye. That's fine, I'm confused as to why I'm laughing too, but I can't seem to stop. I laugh so hard my eyes water. Ok, maybe running from a mob wasn't too bad, it was kind of funny. This whole situation is pretty funny actually, in a sort of panicked kind of way. I never thought I'd find myself being dragged off by a movie star to avoid their rabid fans.

"It's like we were in a movie," I say around my laughter, watching Matt for his reaction. "Running from a mob of fans, don't you think?"

"You're not mad?"

"Why would I be mad? If we were caught and I was trampled to death then I'd be mad, but that back there was a little fun." I pinch my fingers together. "Only a little though."

"Only a little?" Matt snorts. "Then why are you still laughing about it?"

"I'm delirious from nearly dying?"

Matt joins in on my laughter, smiling brightly, which doesn't help the heart racing, but there's not much I can do about that right now. We're on our way to get something to eat when I ask, "Does that happen a lot?"

"What?"

"Being chased."

Matt shrugs. "More so recently. After I took a break, it was pretty quiet since no one expected to see me. Now it feels like everyone is specifically looking for me."

That makes sense, especially with the article coming out. I frown at the memory.

"Do you normally go out on your own? To see movies and stuff?"

"Most of the time," Matt answers. "Sometimes I take my sisters, if they aren't annoying me."

I snicker. "That must be an older sibling thing. My sister says that about me."

"It is an older sibling thing. We're the ones always being chased after." Matt shakes his head, but he's smiling softly so it's obvious he doesn't actually mind.

"That just means you're loved."

"Or they're evil demons that just want to annoy me."

"I'm sure they love hanging out with their older brother. I love spending time with my sister, even if I do my best to annoy her."

"If being annoyed is an older sibling thing then I guess being annoying is a little sibling thing."

I nod eagerly, smiling at the eye roll Matt gives when I answer, "Absolutely."

We reach a restaurant not long afterwards and make sure to take a booth in the corner as to not be seen. Well, Matt is the one that can't be seen. Sitting together eating is a lot easier than I suspected, although considering how easily we've been talking this whole day that should be expected by this point. We may not be as animated as others and sometimes our conversations die off, but it never leads to an awkward or unsettling feeling.

Matt smiles and laughs easier now, it seems. I can't deny that I really like that he does. It's the eye smile, I swear, it's deadly. But that's the point of today, isn't it? For Matt to feel better about all the gossip and the article, which I make sure to never bring up. It's not any of my business anyways. Rumors and gossip should always be taken with a grain of salt, especially when it comes to those in the spotlight. There's always those that just want to tear them down for the sake of being a jerk.

So when our day comes to an end, we've seen a movie, spent some time together, and went out to eat, Matt drives me back to the dorms. It takes us longer to get there than it did to leave, but I'm not complaining. Much like the last time he dropped me off, Matt pulls up to the dorms and waits for me to step out. I hesitate outside the door, peering in at his soft smile.

"Thanks for inviting me today," I say, wondering if I sound like an idiot for doing so.

"I should be the one thanking you for coming. I wasn't sure you'd say yes."

"Well...I'm glad I did."

"Me too. We should do it again sometime, soon."

"Maybe without being chased though?"

"Yeah, definitely without that." Matt chuckles.

I don't know what else to say. I guess I'm not meant to. He's dropping me off so I should go, but there's a part of me that doesn't want to. I don't know how long I stand there looking like a complete idiot, but Matt never says anything about it. He just smiles until I finally come to my senses.

"S-See you later then." I wave, slowly shutting the door.

"See you later."

Then I'm rushing to my room, only turning back once to see Matt waiting there. I don't hear his car leave until I'm out of view and once I'm out of view I slip onto one of the benches. My legs are shaking and my heart's still racing like crazy. It has been almost all day.

Crap. This is not good. Not good at all.

~

***deep breath* YOU CUTE PIECES OF GARBAGE! So this was an interesting...date? It was totally a date lol But did Matt think of it like a date? And will our boys start getting closer from here on out? :D**

12. Shoulda Swiped Left

I'm dreading returning because I know who will be at the dorm; my no good, nosy roommate (I say that with love.) I've already told him I skipped because I wanted to, but best I think up a lie to give before returning otherwise he'll put too many pieces together. Suppose I can be a little honest; I went to the movies, just don't tell him who with or the real reason why.

As expected, the moment I enter the dorm room, Tori asks, "Where have you been?"

"I told you, I just wanted to skip."

Tori's sitting on his bed with a controller in hand. The TV's on, his game paused so all focus can be put on interrogating my unfortunate self. Oh joy! Tori's eyes narrow in obvious disbelief. "Mhm, why did you want to skip? Where did you even go?"

"Took a bus to the mall to see a movie."

Tori hops out of bed. He's beside me in less than a second, inspecting me from head to toe like the weirdo that he is.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"You sure you weren't on a date?"

"H-Huh?"

"Your face is red."

I press my hands to my cheeks finding that yeah, my face is still warm. Damn it all! I even waited downstairs for a bit in order to calm down. Why am I overreacting anyways? It wasn't a date or anything. Matt and I went to

the movies then got some food, that's it! A perfectly normal thing to do among friends...which we are, I guess?

"I took the stairs up here, must have been the exercise," I lie in what I hope to be a believable fashion, but this is Tori we're talking about. His Spidey Senses are honestly good and by good I mean terrible because he catches on too quick for comfort.

"You definitely went on a date. Who with? What's his name? How did you meet?" Tori is shaking me now. "Give me the deets!"

"Why do you care?"

"Because I am your loving friend that wishes to know."

"You mean because you're nosy and can't stay out of other people's business?"

"That too, but mostly because I'm your friend!"

I roll my eyes, smacking Tori's hand away. It's only then that I realized I basically fell into his trap. I didn't continue to deny it wasn't a date. Shit.

"It wasn't a date and there are no details. You're worse than my sister!" I rush over to my desk. There's some assignments that need to be done. At least Tori knows not to bother me when I'm working. He backs off, for now.

If only my mind would back off too. No matter how much I attempt to work, nothing really gets done. My eyes scan over the reading material only to take in absolutely nothing. I'm left sitting here, remembering the feel of Matt's hand in mine. His touch was warm, a little tight during our running fiasco, but comforting nevertheless. Thinking of it quickens my pulse yet again.

Stop, stop it, Dana! It doesn't matter. You're just acting like this because you haven't dated in a while, or arguably at all. Not sure if my boyfriend at the age of 14 really counts seeing as the most we did was kiss and hold hands before breaking it off when he moved states. The relationship was short and

sweet, certainly not a bad memory, but not exactly close to a real dating experience, for lack of a better description.

Perhaps I should look into dating?

I lean back in my chair, arms crossed in thought.

There's apps for that nowadays, although I'm not so sure about downloading a dating app though. Always feels as if others are looking for a booty call, which I haven't the interest, experience, or confidence for. Suppose there are others like me though; honestly looking for a relationship that may last. And what better time than now? I'm in college, experiencing life on my own, nothing wrong with scoping out the dating scene...right?

I take a glance at Tori. He's concentrating on his game, tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth. I think there's even a bit of droll. It has me rolling my eyes because, I can't believe I'm considering this, but he's the one to ask if I want to seriously look into dating. Tori is smooth when he wants to be, even if it's with girls he at least has some know how.

Do I really want to talk to him about this though? Ugh, I don't think I can do it on my own though! What would I even put on my profile? Lanky redhead with social anxiety? That will definitely scare off every potential partner within a hundred mile radius!

"Tori," I call, slightly dreading his response.

"Hmm?"

"Since we were discussing dates-"

Tori is beside me before I can even finish; eyes wide and excited. "Go on!"

Shit, this was a terrible idea, wasn't it? Too late now!

"I was thinking maybe I should, y'know, date."

"Well, yeah, if you want to," he chuckles, turning serious for a moment. "So...you really weren't on a date earlier?"

I shake my head.

"But now that dating has been brought up, you think that you want to?"

I nod.

"And you...want my assistance?" He's grinning far too happily so I shove him aside. Tori only laughs.

"I was thinking about downloading a dating app or something."

"Eh, you're likely going to get some serious perverts messaging you," he speaks my worst fear. "But there are some actually on apps to date so I say give it a shot, if you really want to!"

"W-Will you help me create a profile?"

Tori is practically vibrating with excitement when he hollers, "Hell yeah! Gimme your phone!"

This was definitely a terrible idea.

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Or maybe it was a great idea because here I am, sitting in a pizza parlor with a very cute blonde. His name is Jeremiah and he's actually a junior at the same college, going for engineering rather than english like myself. After nearly four days of failure and me close to deleting the app, Jeremiah popped up and, after two days, here we are! If he were some place far, I think I would have waited, but we're basically still on campus so I feel ok.

I'm nervous beyond belief, struggling to speak without having to take a drink every thirty seconds. I struggle with day to day conversation so a date is even worse!

"Have you been here before?" Jeremiah asks, leaning against the table. "It's close to campus, but since it's on the backstreet not as many people seem to know about it."
~~~~~~

"I h-haven't," I stutter, wishing that I could get rid of it all together. It's making my blush even worse.

"Their pizza is the best, but I'll leave it at that and let you decide for yourself."

I nod, not sure what to say to that then hate myself for not being able to continue the conversation. Should I ask about his day? Maybe talk about classes? Is that date talk? No, no, that's, like, acquaintance talk. I guess that's what we are, but I need to keep him interested. I need to talk about something, anything-

"Uh, do you like movies?" I ask.

Nice, Dana, way to sound like a dork.

"Eh, not a huge fan," he replies with a shrug and, somehow, that's super...disappointing. I thought I wasn't that into movies, but all of a sudden I can't imagine not loving them.

"D-Do you like to read?"

"Nah, not really into the arts at all. I like being outdoors. You?"

How the hell am I meant to say I'm the exact opposite? Do I like to read? Obviously seeing as I want to be a literary agent. I can dive into books and disappear for days on end. Do I like the outdoors? Hell no, I'm pale as a corpse for a reason. Change the subject, quick, quick!

"I can h-handle being outdoors if s-someone comes with me," is the only response I manage to get out, which appears to please him.

"Maybe we can make plans sometime then? There's this amazing obstacle course nearby, rock climbing, rope bridges, you name it, they got it."

That sounds like my worst nightmare. Say no. Say no, Dana.

"C-Cool, maybe we can do that." That's not how you say no, you dimwit!

The pizza is brought out and Jeremiah certainly didn't lie, the pizza is amazing. I practically inhale the first piece, laughing at Jeremiah's eager nod that practically says, I told you so. But then we fall quiet. I suppose eating is an excuse to be quiet, but there's usually chatter thrown in, right?

With us, there isn't any, and it's awkward. Awkward in the sense that I'm trying desperately to think of something else to say. What have we already talked about through text and what could we discuss now? It already appears we're different, I knew that through text. Jeremiah was charismatic from the start, confident, even now, he's a good looking guy that's easily sociable. Sociable enough to already be chatting with a stranger that happened to be wearing some brand of clothing that he likes. Yet here I am, stuttering over my words and too nervous to say a damn thing.

Get it together, Dana! I promised myself college would be different. I have to try!

Any determination I managed to build though is thrown out the window when the conversation suddenly turns to, "I know why you look so familiar now!"

Jeremiah snaps his fingers, pointing almost accusingly at me when he says, "When I saw your picture, I knew I saw you somewhere. You spilled food on Matthew Jeneviere, right?"

Seriously? Will I ever escape this? That happened, like, a month ago!

"That video was hilarious," he chuckles, either secretly a dick or totally clueless because I'm sure I'm not making a great face right now.

I avert my gaze to the floor, especially when I hear the bell of the shop ring. I don't want anyone to see my face. They likely hear Jeremiah loud and clear. Already, I think some people are staring.

"Did you seriously pay him back? I would have said no way. The dude is loaded," Jeremiah continues with a dismissive wave. "But that video sure blew up, and that article about him? I didn't know that until recently, bet that pushed him off his high horse!"

He was never on a high horse. He just wants to be left alone, isn't that obvious? But once more, I'm tight lipped. There's so much I want to say yet my mouth won't listen.

"Oh, but if you're in contact with him, hey, do you think you can get me his autograph?"

"What?" I finally hiss, glaring at Jeremiah's shocked expression across the table. "Why...why would you ask that?"

"Ah, my bad, this isn't really something to be talking about on a date, huh?"

"Definitely not, but even then, you were just insulting him."

"Isn't it kind of cool though? Getting a celebrities signature."

"No, he's a person, stop treating him like an object."

"Whoa, I'm just teasing, D-" Jeremiah stops short as he, and I, face the person suddenly standing at our table. The person I wish didn't hear any of that, yet here he is, peering down at us with his signature resting bitch face.

"Matt," I mumble, feeling a sudden twinge of guilt, and I honestly can't admit what for. Somehow I feel guilty for going on a date with Jeremiah and him overhearing this conversation. Figures he would come here though, like Jeremiah said, it's on a back street. Like I said, it's remote.

"Do you still want my autograph?" Matt asks. I'm surprised Jeremiah shakes his head no. "You sure? Bet you could sell it online. It won't make you loaded like me, but it's a start."

Jeremiah goes red in the face. I worry there's about to be a physical fight so I stand up fast. With my hand on Matt's arm, I start pushing him towards the door.

"Sorry, Jeremiah, I t-think we s-should go," I say, guiding Matt to the door. He doesn't take his glare off Jeremiah though, not even when we're outside. He just glares through the windows while Jeremiah pokes at the leftover pizza.

I don't know where I'm going until I spot Matt's car parked on the street. Sure, he was likely going in there to get food, but I doubt he wants to go back in now. He is surprisingly docile and easy to walk across the street, my fingers still twisted into his shirt. Then we stop and I let out a long sigh, ready to apologize on my knees if I have to, but, for some reason, Matt beats me to it.

"Sorry," he says, which confuses the hell out of me.

"For?"

"What happened."

"You didn't do anything?"

"But I did," he says, and although his face doesn't show a damn thing, his tone of voice trembles. "You are associated with Matthew Jeneviere, no one will ever let you forget that."

Matt swings open his car door. "And sorry for interrupting your date."

Date, he practically hissed that, or maybe I'm hearing things. I'm hoping I am, I think.

"I'll give you some though," he says.

"W-What?" I ask, still in shock by his words, trying to come up with a response, but he won't give me the time.

"My autograph, in case someone else asks." With that, he slides into his car, slams the door and peels out onto the street.

I have no idea what just happened or how the hell I'm meant to react.

~

Aw, Dana D= Our poor boy just wanted to go on a date, but the date was a jerk and now Matt's feelings are hurt! What's going to happen between our boys now?

13. Flip Flops, But Not Like the Shoes

I wish I had some idea how to properly interact with the rest of the human race. Perhaps I should look into reading a manual. There's plenty of different "How To" books out there. Surely there must be one that speaks of communication, friendliness, and apologies. I'm in dire need of one now seeing as, for the last few days, Matt hasn't said a word to me nor I to him.

I check my phone over and over only to realize; there's nothing. No correspondence or attempts to chat, which isn't unusual. I tell myself this time and time again. Matt and I don't text everyday, but after the movie, after dinner, I don't know I thought that we would, I guess? We aren't talking at all and he won't even look at me in class. Something is off. Something is very wrong. I want to apologize, but what for?

The date? What Jeremiah said? How I didn't immediately stand up for him?

How embarrassing. I'm such a fucking loser, never being able to speak my mind when I really need to. The internet always makes me feel like shit, reading about how all these people are able to stand up and defend others so easily while claiming it's the right thing to do and others should do the same in their position. I think back to what I would do and realize I'd cower in a corner, become the bystander that did nothing that everyone hates. I wish I was brave.

In the end, another day passes without talking. I go to work where I make so many mistakes that my uniform is basically ruined by the end of the night. The smell is so atrocious that Becky stays on the other side of the room, pinching her nose with a very telling expression. I can't help it that I ended up spilling nearly every condiment at least once this evening. I slipped on the floor while mopping, managing to kick over the bucket too so the dirty water spread across the floor and my pants.

Returning to the dorms, I overhear Tori grumble from the room, "Whoa, what the hell is that smell?"

"Dana!" He shouts, spotting me kicking off my shoes. He's sitting at his desk, grimacing upon realizing what that smell is. "Ok, be honest with me. Did you die and a necromancer reanimated your rotting corpse? Because you, my good friend, smell fucking terrible."

I only sigh, grab clean clothes and slip into the bathroom.

"Take that shit to the laundry asap!" Tori calls from outside the door. "Our dorm is gonna smell for days just from you coming in!"

Another sigh.

This has been a terrible, terrible day.

Tori is right though so those nasty ass clothes are taken to the laundry room immediately. By the time I return, he has finished up his homework and found a comfortable position in bed. Smiling, he asks, "Bad day?"

"Mhm."

"What happened?"

"I was a klutz."

Tori snickers. "That's nothing new."

"Why do you hurt me?" I groan when flinging myself onto bed, twisting into the blankets until I've become a Dana-rito. My phone rests on the bedside table. Although there's no noise, not even a vibration, I continuously check as if I expect it to light up with a text. A text that never comes.

Inevitably, I snatch that phone along with my headphones. Tori is busy chuckling over some youtube video. Rather than disturb him, or risk him sticking his nose in this, I put in my headphones and fall to the ultimate low.

I look up interviews with Matt in hopes to learn something that could lead to me successfully apologizing. Most of the interviews are old, not surprising seeing as it's been two years since he has been in anything. Some are with co-stars where I thought Matt would put on a show for the camera, but he's his quiet self, sitting next to them with his usual soft voice and almost shy demeanor. I'm a little shocked when one of his older co-stars brings it up, a sort of friendly taunt as he ruffles Matt's hair.

"I thought this one was a little snobby when we first met, honestly," the guy says. I recognize him as having been in quite a few big budget films. In this case, Matt played the younger version of the main character in a movie. "He was very quiet, always off on his own somewhere. I don't think we really started talking until I took the initiative and, even after, he always nervously started conversation."

Matt sinks a little lower in his chair, but he's smiling when they all laugh. The interviewer then asks, "Were you intimidated, Matt?"

"Yeah," he answers with a familiar nervous tick I caught him doing before; scratching or flicking his fingernails. "Everyone assumes because I'm an actor that I'm friendly or charismatic, but...when it comes to socializing, I'm not really--" he shrugs. "The best."

And that certainly shows the more I click through interviews. Matt is distant at school and I thought that wasn't his usual, but apparently it is because he's distant in interviews too. His nervous tick shows throughout. Sometimes I catch him even doing things I've done when nervous; biting his bottom lip, avoiding eye contact, seeming to desperately plead with his gaze for someone else to answer because he's at a loss.

My cheeks heat up a bit when I end up falling down the rabbit hole to discover a video specifically about dating. It's only Matt on screen, wearing a snug black sweater in front of a pale pink background. The video is already playing but I'm about to click off when he pulls a question out of a black jar and reads it aloud, "Have you ever dated?"

I'm not interested. I'm totally not interested. I'm only here to try and find out how to apologize. Why the hell am I still watching?

Matt hums, swaying once in his seat while rolling the paper between his fingers. There's definitely a tint of pink on his cheeks when he grumbles out a quiet, "Yeah."

He tosses the slip aside and the interviewer is heard on the other end of the camera, "Just yeah? Give us some details!"

"It just asked if I ever dated," Matt claims, smiling shyly as he points to the fallen paper. "That's all you're getting."

"Aaaaw."

But the next question is pulled out and Matt swings back in his chair when whispering, "Can I pick another one?"

"No way!"

Matt hesitates to read the question before fumbling through it, "Have you had your first kiss? If yes, tell us about it."

Those on set are giggling and clapping while Matt turns red. He's really obvious in that black sweater. He actually sits there a moment, twisting the paper in his fingers. He won't look at the camera when he says, "I was 15. We were at a football game. It happened under the bleachers and it tasted like Red Bull. That's it."

I'm blushing along with him, having to turn onto my side away from Tori in fear that he'll notice how red I am. Suddenly, the room is really hot. I'm not here to learn about Matt's dating life! I wanna know how to apologize!

And yet I don't click away.

Matt is already digging into the jar for another question as the crew requests more. He shakes his head when reading the final question that actually makes me choke in surprise. Maybe the universe doesn't hate me because this question is actually helpful in my original plan for watching these videos to begin with; "How would you apologize if your partner was mad at you?"

I look away. For some reason, that question is making my heart race, not that it wasn't already.

"Depends on what I did," he answers. "Saying sorry outright is a good start, but I'd like to do something for or with them in hopes to make them feel better. Maybe we could go to the park, see a movie, get some dinner, something like that."

That's pretty standard, simple and easy, right? I could do that. But the idea of him saying no has me hesitating. I finally closed out of the video, which was about to end anyways. My finger hovers over Matt's contact, wondering if I should go through with it. I'd rather ask over text so when he rejects me, it won't be too bad.

Ok, ok, you got this, Dana. Apologize for what happened the other day and ask if you can treat him to a meal for, y'know, always helping out like with giving you a ride and the umbrella. It's easy through text.

Because he can't see the blush that I feel burning behind my cheeks or notice the slight trembling my hand.

Me: Hi, Matt. I'm really sorry about the other day. I wish I said more to Jeremiah. Um, I'm just sorry you saw that. As an apology, I thought maybe we could get some dinner or something? My treat.

I hit send before I can change my mind, but as soon as I read it over, it sounds stupid.

Me: I understand if you don't want to. Sorry.

That sounds stupid too, ugh! I shouldn't have said anything.

I bury my face into the pillow, groaning, tapping my fingers, slightly hearing Tori ask me if my reanimated corpse is functioning properly. His comment is ignored until my phone rings. I jump at the sound, shocked to find not a text but rather a call. I half expect it to be my parents until I see Matt's name on screen.

Wait, why is he calling? Did my text make him that mad? Holy shit, I can't answer. No way, I'm not answering!

I let it go to voicemail in a panic, shielding myself under the blankets, but then it rings again. I squeak, check and see that it's Matt again. Tori asks about the call, but I'm rushing out the door with a lie that it's my parents and I'll take it in the lounge. If Tori has any other questions, they're cut off by the door closing and me debating letting this go to voicemail again...but I feel like an asshole for already doing that once.

"H-Hello?" I sputter when making my way to the lounge at the end of the hall. No one else is there so I take a seat on one of the couches.

"Were you busy?" Matt asks. "You didn't answer the first time."

"Uh, I was...i-in the shower."

There's a moment of silence before Matt asks, "What did you apologize for?"

I'm taken aback enough to only respond with a quiet, "Huh?"

"There's no reason for you to apologize," he explains.

I'm tempted to point out how we haven't talked at all or even acknowledged each other's existence the last few days, but the words won't come out.

"You were really upset the other day so--" I pick at the fabric of the couch, nervously peering about the room as if I expect someone to pop up and announce that they know I'm talking to Matt. Obviously that doesn't happen. "I thought you were mad at me f-for not standing up for you or something."

"But you did, twice actually." When I don't respond to that, he says, "At Subway, with the reporter."

"Ah...that...I-I mean, does that count? I j-just told him to leave."

"Yeah, but no one else did," he says that like he's the one that's proud. I don't know how to explain it, but there's something about his voice that makes me swell up with pride that I didn't even know I could have.

But all that I manage to say is a quiet, "Oh."

There's silence. I'd say it's uncomfortable, but that isn't the right word. A sort of anxious veil passes over me, one that is surprisingly warm as the seconds tick away. Topics of conversation fade in and out of my mind, always poking at my vocal chords but never managing to make them work.

In the end, it's Matt that speaks, "When do you have free time?"

"W-What?"

"For dinner."

Ah, right, I asked if we could get dinner. Yeah...shit, I shouldn't have. I don't know if I can handle it, especially when I can't stop thinking about Matt's blush as he sat in front of the pink background. What would he think if I admitted I watched interviews with him like some kind of creepy stalker?!

"Dana?"

I squeak, "Y-yeah? Oh, uh, I work tomorrow morning cause I don't have classes but, um, I'm free in the afternoon."

"Ok, I can come get you after work. What time do you get off?"

"No, no, I need to get back to the dorm and clean up first."

"I can drive you back to the dorm."

I'm trying to think up reasons to say no, sputtering out a confused, "I get off at three, isn't that too early for dinner?"

"We can find something to do until dinner. I'll see you at three then," he says and by the tone of his voice, I know there is no arguing.

"Ok." I hope he doesn't notice how breathless I sound.

Matt suddenly hums, causing me to twist my fingers into my sweats when he asks, "Will your boyfriend be ok with that though? Us getting dinner."

"B-B-Boyfriend?!"

"The guy, Jerry or whatever."

Jeremiah, but I don't point that out because I'm busy explaining, "He's not my boyfriend."

Matt's quiet and I'm not sure how that makes me feel.

"It wasn't anything s-serious. We just met up and, well, I'm not talking to him anymore so we're not together. I learned my lesson not to use dating apps," I quickly tell him, once again feeling guilty for some reason. Then I'm burning up at hearing Matt's soft chuckle. A chuckle that turns into warm laughter that makes my stomach do flip flops that I'm not ok with.

"Why are you laughing?" I ask, biting my lip to hold back a smile because I shouldn't be smiling simply because of the sound of his laugh. We definitely can't go to dinner. I'm going to actually drop dead from embarrassment.

"No reason," he answers, which is a total lie. "See you tomorrow, Dana."

"Ok...see you tomorrow."

Matt hangs up and I've clocked out. We've had dinner before, but this time feels so much different. Maybe it's due to my heart refusing to take a rest, or my memory that refuses to forget Matt's warm laughter and sweet blush.

I'm in trouble.

~

***gasp* it's definitely a date, isn't it? How do you think their day is going to go? Will our socially inept boys learn how to interact with each other or is this ship gonna sink? lol**

14. The Eldest Sibling Always Suffers

The end is upon us. And by us I mean me.

Three o'clock rolls around. I should be ecstatic to end my shift, but there are only nerves. Today, Matt and I are hanging out. This should be no big deal, but it is. It definitely is. Especially when my nerves are amplified by a million and one when stepping out of the shop to discover Matt is already waiting.

Ah, it's a pictorial.

Matt's leaning against his car like every chic MC from the movies. His black shirt has sleeves that are a tad too long, reaching to the knuckles of his hands. Those that walk by tend to give a second glance, either in shock of who he is or giggling over the fact. My stomach twists into a knot because, damn it, stop treating this like a photoshoot!

When he raises his gaze and spots me, the dumbass lingering in the doorway, he smiles.

"Dana, ready to go?" he asks, slipping his phone into his pocket. He opens the passenger door. My gaze switches from left to right, observing those on the sidewalk. Thankfully, it's rather empty. Most are in class or have already gone home.

"I-I can walk," I suggest again, but still waddle my way over to the car. I smell like the backroom of Subway, which isn't pleasant. Matt makes no mention of it.

"Get in," he says, acting as if I never made a suggestion. There's really no point arguing either when he's already here so I slide in. My cheeks are on fire when he closes the door behind me.

He's been in too many drama's. Who even does that anymore?!

The ride is silent. I'd call it awkward, but Matt appears alright. If anything, I'd say he's a little giddy. His fingers tap against the wheel. When he happens to catch my weird staring, he smirks. That's dangerous. He shouldn't be allowed to do that. It's against the rules. I don't know who made the rules, but they're there for a reason and that reason is to keep my heart from exploding.

"Do you want to come up?" I ask when Matt parks at the dorms. "I need to get a shower. Um, Tori has class so--"

So what? Why does it matter if he isn't there? I don't know and suddenly I regret asking. It'd be better if he stays here, but it's too late to take that back.

"Ok." Matt steps out of the car without another word.

This is very bad.

We walk side by side to the front doors of the dorm. He has to sign in under my name before taking the elevator. He's peering about the halls. I'm going to assume he's never been in the dorms, which aren't all that grand. I guess I was eager when coming here for the first time too though. I end up fumbling with the keys since the door won't unlock until I realize we're at the wrong room.

"Oops." I nervously laugh, going one more door down and swinging the door open easily. There's shoes in the entryway so I kick them out of the way. "Ah, sorry for the mess."

"It's fine," Matt says, following behind me. He kicks his shoes off. There's really nothing much in here other than our beds, two small desks, two dressers and a TV stand. I gesture for Matt to take a seat wherever he wants, which ends up being the desk chair.

"I-I won't be long," I mutter, swiftly grabbing the clothes I laid out earlier. He already has the TV on so at least he won't be sitting in silence while I get ready.

"What are you doing, Dana?" I whisper once in the bathroom. The shower water is running. I check the temperature with the tip of my fingers, hissing from the heat. "Stop being weird. Stop, stop." I pat my cheeks a few times with a determined huff.

That determination fades the moment I've changed and following Matt back downstairs to the car.

"Is there anywhere you want to go?" Matt asks on the way down. His question stumps me long enough for him to realize I don't get why he asked. He snickers. "It's too early for dinner."

"Ah, right...right." We're spending the whole afternoon together..."Uh, I'm fine w-with whatever."

"How are your golfing skills?"

I choke on my immediate laughter, which is answer enough.

"Not good?" Matt asks around a smile that I can't look at for more than a second without bursting into flames so I turn away.

"Any kind of sport, I'm terrible at."

"Good, it'll be a fair game then." Matt steps out of the elevator with me running to catch up with his long strides.

"Are we going mini golfing then?"

"If you're ok with that."

Matt swings the car door open while I round the car. Nodding, I answer, "Yeah, I haven't done that since I was a kid. I didn't even know there was a course nearby."

"Neither did I," he says when slipping into the car. It isn't until I'm in the passenger seat and we're pulling out of the lot that something clicks in my head.

He didn't know there was a course nearby? But if he brought it up then that means he had to research it...

Nope, don't think about it! If you think about it you're going to get your hopes up, or something. I don't know, but no over-analyzing! Get it together, Dana! I'd smack myself in the face again, but I rather not frighten Matt so there's none of that.

I'm thinking about how badly I'll lose at minigolf when Matt's phone rings. The caller ID pops up on the dash; Michelle.

Who's that?

I don't get to ask though. Matt clicks a button on the steering wheel and the call is cut off. He's about to say something when there's another ring. The dash lights up once more, this time the caller ID says Marcy.

"That's cheating," he whispers then gives an apologetic smile. "You mind if I take this?"

"Huh? O-Of course not, go ahead." Although I admit I'm a little taken aback he is letting me listen into the conversation.

The moment he answers, a young girl squeaks, "Mattie, where are you?"

I bite my lip to stave off a smile at the nickname.

"I'm going out with--" he hesitates. "A friend."

I refuse to admit that I'm a little disappointed.

"You're not coming to the apartment?" she asks. There's voices in the background. "Mm, we came over to visit."

"Huh?" Matt's brow furrows. "Are you already there?"

"Yep! Mandy's eating all your gummy worms."

"Tattle tail!" another girl shrieks in the background while Marcy giggles.

"Why didn't you call before you came over?" Matt grumbles. I catch him glancing at me, but he quickly focuses back on the road. "I have plans."

I point to the dashboard when mouthing, "Your sisters?"

Matt nods so I quickly whisper, "We can go another time."

"Just bring your friend over then," a new girl's voice chimes in. I faintly hear Marcy whining in the background about having her phone taken. "You never let us meet your friends anyways."

"That's because he doesn't have any!" shouts Mandy, at least I think it is based on her voice.

"I'm not forcing anyone over to put up with you three," says Matt, but the words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"I'm fine with that," I say, resulting in both of us going wide-eyed.

"Oh, is that your friend?" the oldest sister laughs. "Hi, I'm Michelle! Have Matt bring you to the apartment. We'll order some food, what do you want?"

All M's; Matt, Michelle, Mandy and Marcy. Wow!

"Uh..." I look to Matt for guidance. If he really doesn't want me to tag along then I understand. This is his family and maybe he doesn't want me around them. However, all he does is give a shrug to tell me it's up to me.

Maybe this isn't a good idea though. Meeting his sisters, that's delving further into Matt's life, more so than most it seems. But there's denying that I actually would like to go. What does his apartment look like? Is it filled with movie posters and odd movie related memorabilia? What is his family like? I want to know more even when I know that I shouldn't.

"Pizza?" I end up suggesting since I can't think of anything else.

"Pizza it is," says Michelle. "Oh, and Matt."

"What?"

"Clean your room. It's disgusting."

"You're one to talk." Matt snorts then bristles. "And stay out of my room!" He swiftly cuts off the call just in time for me to double over with laughter. Tears build while Matt asks, "What's so funny?"

"I've been on the receiving end of that!" I holler, thinking of all the times I snuck into Brigette's room purely to piss her off. Oh good times, good times.

Matt waits until I've calmed down enough to breathe again before he asks, "Are you really ok with coming over?"

"Are you?" I return the question, peering over at him. He's focused on the road, but he gives a brief glance from the corner of his eye. "They said you don't really bring friends over, so if you don't want me to come along-"

"I do," he interrupts with a clear of his throat. "But...we had plans."

"We can try this another time?" I suggest only to realize that by doing so I've promised to spend another day with Matt. There's no taking that back though.

He smirks when saying, "Ok, another time then."

Dana, why do you do this to yourself?

~~~~~~

Matt's apartment complex is...surprisingly normal.

I don't know what I expected? Statues of lions made of marble or doors made of diamond and pillars of gold, but that sure as hell ain't what I'm looking at. The complex is a gated community and there are a few apartment buildings among the lush green grass. There is obviously some extensive upkeep so, yeah, those that live here have to have some
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semblance of money. But I thought there'd be some fountains or a golden statue? Who knows.

I spotted at least two pools driving in, but inside the complex are the typical plain floors and walls with an empty elevator. I thought there'd be some dude inside offering us forced smiles and maybe a glass of wine. The elevator takes us to the ninth floor where I follow Matt down a long hall to a door that says "9" except he has stuck up a piece of paper so that it reads "9 ¾".

"Nice Harry Potter reference." I smile at the small smirk he sends over his shoulder. He doesn't unlock the door though, instead facing me.

"The girls can be a bit...overzealous," he whispers, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "If you're uncomfortable or want to go, feel free to tell me. And if they're getting on your nerves, tell them."

I doubt I can do that, but I give him a nod in hopes that he'll feel better. Since he unlocks the door, I take that as meaning he's at least ok. Once the door swings open, we step in to kick off our shoes. There are rushed footsteps moments before a short girl with the same blue eyes as Matt, but slightly darker hair, pops up.

"Mattie!" She squeals, throwing herself into her brother's arms. He nearly rams into me. I'm about to be a Dana sandwich! But luckily Matt manages to steady himself and step away.

"Careful, Marcy," he says, but let's her continue to cling to him. He carries her into an open living room. Her toes drag on the ground. I hesitantly follow, peering about the luxurious space.

Matt's apartment is an industrial style loft. The door leads straight into an open living room with tall ceilings and equally tall windows among off gray walls. There's copper piping that I'm fairly certain is more for aesthetics than necessary. The natural sunlight pours into the room of dark gray furniture and sleek stone floors. To the right is a hallway leading to the kitchen that is behind a sliding metal door. The other door in the hall must be to the bathroom. As for Matt's bedroom, it's up a set of stairs to the loft

above, surrounded by black piping fence. The stairway is also a shelving unit, filled with movies and the square beneath the loft is actually an office area with clear glass doors revealing a desk and computer. In other words, it's expensive as hell.

Michelle and Mandy are on the couch watching a movie that they mute once we're in the room. Unlike Matt and Marcy, the older sisters have light green eyes and dirty blonde hair. I'm not sure who is who until the tallest of the three stands and says, "You must be Matt's one and only friend-"

Matt rolls his eyes when plopping into a chair. Marcy simply sits in his lap, already talking to him about something she's doing at school. He listens with rapt attention, smiling and nodding along.

"I'm Michelle," the tallest girl says, and gestures to the other two. "This is Mandy and Marcy."

I wave when introducing myself, "I'm Dana."

"Nice to meet you." Michelle holds out her hands for me to shake, which I do. "So you go to school together?"

I nod.

"How'd you meet?"

"Don't interrogate him," Matt hisses, causing Marcy to giggle as if her sister had gotten into trouble. Michelle doesn't feel the same way it seems because she only rolls her eyes.

"I'm curious!" She exclaims, retaking her seat by Mandy. She gestures for me to sit down on the other armchair as well. I slowly do so while continuing to admire the apartment. There are movie and drama posters on the walls. The coasters on the glass table look like Star Trek teleportation pads and they light up when Mandy sits her drink on it so the liquid glows within. I smile at that because...how very Matt.

"Um, I actually spilled food on him in the cafeteria," I explain, nervously laughing then cringing at the memory. The girls all laugh. Across the room, Matt scowls but says nothing. When he catches my gaze though, he puts on a smile that makes my toes curl. I look away.

"So what? Did he get mad at you?" Michelle looks to Matt with a disappointed scowl. "Were you being a jerk?"

Matt actually appears offended. Leaning back with a look of disbelief before he points accusingly, "If any of us would get mad about their clothes getting ruined, it'd be you. You screamed at me for, like, ten minutes when I got a spot of ketchup on your shirt."

Michelle shrugs. "Yeah, but you're my brother. It's my job to put you down."

I snort at that, sheepishly grinning at Matt's disbelief being turned to me. Sorry, but I am taking the younger siblings' sides because, hi, I am a younger sibling.

"He w-was really nice about it," I explain, picking at the ends of my t-shirt since I can't stand sitting still. "I tried to p-pay him back but he told me not to worry about it."

"I would have taken the money," Mandy whispers so Matt smacks her upside the head for it. She squeaks, says nothing, but sticks her tongue out.

The light hearted atmosphere is shattered though when Michelle asks, "Ah, so you two started dating after that?"

I don't know who starts coughing first; me or Matt. But we're both coughing, with me somehow choking on my own breath. I'm not so sure about Matt. He recovers quick enough to say, "We aren't dating."

I'm slamming my hand into my chest when Michelle leans over to whisper something to Mandy. Both then stare at me, their brother and back to me. Although neither say anything more about that, Michelle holds her hands up in surrender.

"Ok, ok, not dating. Then your...friendship started after that?" She may have said friendship, but I heard the word "dating," and now my heart won't stop slamming into my ribcage.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea that I came over. My face is heating up. All this attention is making me nervous (and hopeful.)

"When is the pizza getting here?" Matt asks, ending the interrogation. Marcy giggles about it while Michelle and Mandy give very knowing stares. I may not know them but I swear I can read their looks that are stating they are only letting this slide because we just met.

"Should be here in about twenty minutes," Mandy finally answers.

"How long are you staying?"

"Do you want us to leave?" Marcy pouts, successfully making Matt feel bad based on his slumped shoulders.

"No, I'm just curious."

"We have to be home by ten." It's Michelle's turn to roll her eyes. I see the family resemblance because she definitely looks like Matt when annoyed. The slight scowl and the intimidating eyes. "Apparently, I'm not allowed to drive when it gets too late. I guess after midnight I lose my eyesight or some shit."

"We're lucky we came over at all. Mom was being a pain," Mandy adds then glances at me. Whatever else she has to say, she cuts herself off, shrugging when leaning back into the couch. "Why don't you get a bigger apartment and let us all move in?"

"I moved out for a reason," Matt teases, earning a pinch from Marcy. The two of them laugh with him pressing a swift kiss to her forehead. "Keep up your grades and go to college and I'll pay for your apartment."

Mandy sits up fast, wide-eyed and slack jawed. "Seriously? I'm holding you to that!"

Matt waves her off as if it's no big deal to offer to pay for your sisters apartment while in college. Wow, I kind of hate rich people.

"Besides, we wouldn't come over to visit out of the blue if you came home every once in a while," Michelle accuses, crossing her legs and arms. "You're such a neglecting older brother."

"Neglecting, right," Matt snorts. "Seriously, call next time. We had plans."

"A date, you mean," Marcy whispers, but her whisper is loud enough for the whole room to hear. The girls laugh yet again with Matt glaring at her and me practically bursting into flames.

"Not a date," he says yet peers across the room at me.

I'm not sure what he's trying to say. I'm not sure what I want him to say.

~

***whispers* it was a date that was ruined, only for them to promise to go on another, muhahahahaha! So we met Matt's sisters, what do you think of them?**

15. Car Talks & Heart Skips

Dinner with the girls is chaotic to say the least. They aren't like Matt, that's for sure. While Mandy is more quiet than Marcy and Michelle, all three are more talkative than their rather antisocial brother. He does seem to speak more around them, but their boisterous nature cancels us out so Matt and I end up sitting around most of the evening listening.

They go on about school and ask about our own classes. Michelle is a senior and already accepted into college. Mandy is thinking of going here when she's older and Marcy has joined the band. She plays the flute and is already planning to give Matt his own mini-concert. I'm invited too with an innocent smile that I can't say no to.

Once again, I've made a promise to spend more time with Matt. I get the feeling Marcy did that on purpose. She's more conniving than she appears!

But it's getting late and Matt announces, "I should take Dana back to the dorms."

"Huh? Why?" Michelle pouts, having dragged me to the couch to sit between her and Mandy. Marcy has been all over Matt, following him around like a lost puppy so I can see who her favorite sibling is, but there's no denying how cute that is or how cute Matt is with her.

Wait.

Uh, I mean...well...

"It's only, like, nine!" Michelle adds. Matt is already up with car keys in hand. He glances at me, almost asking with his eyes to follow so we can escape easily.

"Ah, the dorms close at ten," I lie, seeing as they actually lock up at midnight since it's the weekend. I scurry around the coffee table to follow Matt to the door.

"It was nice meeting you!" Michelle calls, waving from the couch with Mandy giving a half wave and Marcy nearly throwing her arm out of it's socket.

"Make sure to come over for my concert!" says Marcy with a bright smile that I easily return.

"I will." With another wave, I follow Matt out the door. I swear he power walks to the elevator, limbs stiff as boards until we're "safe" in said elevator. When the doors close, he faces me.

"Sorry about them," he says.

I'm confused enough to ask, "What do you mean?"

"They're...a lot."

I snort. "No argument there, but it was fun." I shrug at the raised brow and twisted upper lip that he gives in response, as if to say I'm crazy. "They were nice and they love you a lot, especially Marcy."

Matt nods. His sudden silence has me curious. The elevator doors open and that silence follows us to the car. I'd say there's a frown on his face, but I can't say for certain.

"Something wrong?" I ask. His wanting us to leave and demeanor now is making me nervous. I worry that he really didn't want me to tag along.

"Hmm?" He shakes his head when pulling out of the parking lot. "No."

"Did...did you not want me to meet them?"

"Huh?" Matt whips his head to the side until he remembers he's driving. Stiffening, he focuses completely on the road when answering, "I would have told you if I didn't want you to come."

True. Matt can be very blunt.

Nodding, I lean back into my seat, but a new sort of tension builds. Matt's quiet. I'm quiet. The radio plays a song I vaguely recognize, but the music seems quiet too. Matt's knuckles are white on the steering wheel then they relax. He sighs. The sound actually makes me flinch, although I don't know why. Because I'm an anxious wreck, I guess?

"Marcy doesn't like that I moved out," Matt speaks, bringing my attention to him. I tilt my head in question.

"Ah, I get that. My family didn't like that I moved all the way to the dorms either." And if Marcy is as attached as she seems to be, she must have really hated that her big brother isn't at home anymore. She's not old enough to drive. I imagine she can't jump on a bus by herself yet either, especially when her face may be known. It wouldn't be safe.

"Must be tough. She's really attached to you," I add, watching Matt give a slow nod. "Why did you move out then?" I realize afterwards that it may have been too personal of a question. Quickly, I wave my hands about to explain, "Ah, I'm sorry, t-that was too personal! I s-shouldn't have asked."

"It's fine. I know you are asking with good intentions." He shrugs like his words are no big deal. Maybe not to him, but they are to me.

Matt is someone whose life is exploited for clicks. A rare few are truly interested. Most want in on the gossip; claiming the attention and heat comes with the territory as if that is any excuse towards the cruel actions towards anyone in the spotlight. Matt knows this most of all and keeps to himself because of it, so to be able to not only take me to his apartment, let me meet his family, and even imply that he's willing to talk about that home life while trusting me to keep it secret? It's an amazing feeling; the feeling of being trusted.

"It's complicated," he says, which I could already guess. "Do you know who my mom is?"

"Uh...she has a beauty company, right?" I recall that being a part of the gossip that Rose was talking about.

Matt nods. Complicated may not be able to describe the relationship though as Matt's face contorts into one of obvious frustration. His jaw grinds when he explains, "She's a strong business woman, no one can argue with that, but she's also anal as hell with an obsessive need to be in control of everything, including her own children. I got into acting because of her."

Although that's a common occurrence among childhood actors, I'm still surprised to hear it. Matt has an obvious love for movies, for storytelling and characters. This isn't an interest merely because it's his job. He's earnestly involved and interested in movies as a whole. I thought he was always interested and jumped at an opportunity as a kid. I've been proven wrong.

"She was always in charge of everything, which isn't always a bad thing considering what happens to some in the industry. As I got older though, she became suffocating. She's not as bad with the girls, especially now that Michelle and Mandy are old enough to stand up to her together. I have no issue with them moving in with me once they get out of high school," he rambles on and I wonder if he's talked to anyone about this before. His lips move as if on autopilot.

"Mom got a lot worse when--" Then Matt stops. His knuckles grow white as sheets of paper while his gaze only darkens.

I'm reminded of the rumors, what the reporter and Rose said;

"Everyone has a lot of questions about your sudden absence. Is it true you went to rehab?"

"Matt got busted with some other young and upcoming celebs at a huge party with lots and lots of drugs and alcohol, and probably unprotected sex."

Unfortunately, I can't remember all that Rose said, but something tells me Matt's mom got worse after whatever happened two years ago. The rumors are only that though, rumors. The only one that knows the true story are those directly involved. I can't ask Matt about that though, or rather, I don't want to. That's definitely personal and obviously an event that strongly

affected him. He disappeared for two years because of the incident from his past.

I'm not surprised he doesn't go into specifics. Whatever else he had to say goes to the back of his mind. He waves the thoughts off. "She just got worse. I needed to leave so I did. I feel bad for the girls, but my door is open so they can come whenever they want, even if I act like they can't."

"I'm sorry, Matt. It's not right for anyone to control you so much. I'm sure the girls understand," I say with a reassuring smile when he glances my way. I'm relieved to see a small smile tug at his lips.

"Yeah, I know they do, so what's your story then?" he asks.

"Story?"

"Yeah, why this college? Why move out?" He blinks rapidly then asks, "What even is your major?"

I laugh at that because, yeah, I never told him. "I'm an English major. I want to be a literary agent or an editor for novels, but uh...honestly, I just wanted to get away from my small town." The nerves are back so I'm picking at the ends of my t-shirt. "I was always a quiet and scrawny kid in a small town. I was teased a lot. I wanted to move somewhere new and fresh, start over, make some friends...and yet I'm too nervous to do most of that."

"Are you though?" Matt asks. He pulls up to the dorms. When he parks, he looks at me and says almost proudly, "You moved away from a place you've always known to work hard at getting an education. You even work part time while doing so. You've made friends. Just because you aren't surrounded by people or going to parties every night doesn't mean you didn't already accomplish exactly what you set out to do."

There are no words, at least not any that I can come up with. Something like thank you doesn't quite fit, although I want to thank him for stating it so confidently that even I can't deny that he's right.

Matt is right.

I moved. I made a few friends, ones that are honestly fun to hang out with, treat me well and don't tease me, at least not like back home. I'm not living on my own, but I'm at the dorms, away from the family I've always known. I'm going to work hard to graduate and I'm working.

"You're pretty amazing, Dana," he says with a smile.

"W-What?" I sputter, feeling my cheeks rise in temperature in less than a second. I'm reaching for the handle of the door. My hands are shaking so I slip and nearly whack my face against the glass because I was already leaning in hopes to escape.

Matt chuckles. The seat squeaks when he leans over to ask, "Are you ok?"

"A-Are you?" I respond, earning a raised eyebrow. "C-Calling me amazing."

He shrugs. "It's true."

I need to leave. I need to run and hide so I'm about to do that, swinging the door open to step out. The air outside of the car is so much cooler, although I'm fairly certain that's my imagination.

"Dana," Matt calls, successfully warming me right back up. Slowly, I face him, leaning over to see his smirk peering back at me. "I had fun today, but next time, it'll be just the two of us. Promise."

My heart skips to the tune of every romance song ever played.

"O-Ok." I curse myself for stuttering, but it's hard not to when Matt is looking at me like that. "I, uh, I'll see you later then."

He waves goodbye. The door shuts. I round the car, rushing for the dorms only to glance back to find Matt's car still there. I'm reminded of the other day when he gave me the umbrella. He waits until I'm out of sight to drive away. Although he's gone, my heart continues to run a mile a minute. My cheeks are on fire. There's no way I can be anywhere near Tori. He'll know something is up!

I pace outside of the dorms, thinking over what happened today. Meeting Matt's sisters and hearing more about his home life, there's no denying I'm curious. I want to know more and...and it seems Matt does too. Why else would he ask about my home life?

The thought of that only makes me worse. The hope continues to build until it's bubbling over. I need to put a lid on these feelings. They aren't going to lead anywhere.

Someone like me with someone like Matt? That'd never happen, not in a million years!

~

***looks at notes* hmm, shall we test that theory, Dana? ;D But, aw, cute family time and cute Matt and Dana time.**

16. Trials of the Socially Inept

Relationships change, often when we least expect it and in ways not originally fathomable.

Matt: I'm bored.

Me: Five more minutes of class. You'll live lol

Matt: I'm fairly certain I'm already dead.

Me: Emo

Matt: It's not a phase, Mom

Me: lol sure, sure
What do you want for lunch?

Matt: Sushi

Me: Boujee

Matt: Nice rhyme
Also shocked you know that word.

Me: I think that's an insult?

Matt: Maybe :)
Getting out of class now. Meet you at the library in ten.

Me: Ok, see you soon!

Matt and I have been texting...a lot; all throughout the day, even during shared classes where we sit apart. So much so that I assume the slight vibration of my phone signals a message from him. Ridiculously enough, I'm disappointed the few times when the text is from another. Then I feel

like a jerk because, apparently, I don't have a single bad bone in my body. Not even a bad-ish bone. Unfair.

To add to this change, we have started eating lunch together in the library too. The first time Matt requested resulted in my immediate panic. I know, not shocking, but his question was super shocking, ok! I didn't say no...because I didn't want to. Giving a lie to Tori to keep him off my back, now that was difficult, but I managed. Now, lunch time together has happened a few days in a row. I grab Matt's meal from the cafeteria. He repays me when we meet up in a quiet corner. We eat together while engrossed in whispered conversation.

There are mostly students working on assignments on the first two floors of the library. Floors three and four are meant to be silent floors and, due to that, are so empty that Matt can get by unnoticed. Our hushed whispers are never called out either. I'm not sure why this started or if it'll end. Will it? Do I really want it too?

I know the answer already.

"Hey," Matt says when appearing around the bookshelves looking as handsome as ever. Sometimes I hate him for it.

"Hi." I smile. He returns the gesture, enticing me with ocean eyes and sweet smiles, sitting across from me as usual.

We're by the window, admiring the cooling campus below. By now the leaves are starting to change. Each day is a little different, sometimes sweltering heat or chilly enough for a jacket. Today is a day for a jacket due to the breeze, gray skies and light rain. Matt's sporting a navy hoodie, which I've found to be a good color on him. What color isn't a good color on him though? A question for another day.

"Mini golf tomorrow then?" he asks, reminding me of our cancelled plans last week. My stomach does back flips while my heart takes notes from olympic gymnasts and scares the shit out of me with far too terrifying performances.

"Sure, I g-get off at three as usual."

"I'll pick you up."

"You don't have to."

"I know, but I want to."

I'm short of breath from simple words accompanied with a warm smile that is growing more familiar by the day. I question if Matt is even aware of what he's doing. The preferential treatment I've been receiving is like one brick stacked upon another, building hope until it's a skyscraper reaching into the clouds. I'm waiting for the inevitable shattering earthquake that sends me crashing back to reality.

"Are you sure you don't...want to invite anyone else, like your sisters?" I say between bites of my lunch. I was starving moments ago. Now I'm uncertain if the butterflies in my stomach are willing to make room for food. Fairly certain they're of the belief that I can survive on the sunshine radiating off Matt's smile alone.

"Do you not want to go?"

"Huh? No, no, I want to, just, well, you could hang out with anyone."

"I guess? But what does that have to do with it?"

I tear at the wrappings in my french fry basket. The library is quiet. Although we're alone, somehow the air is suffocating. Soon there are a handful of rolled up pieces of paper dropping onto the table when I explain, "You could bring someone more entertaining than me along."

Leaning in, he says, "I asked you because I want to spend time with you, Dana."

My toes curl almost painfully.

"I don't get why you don't see yourself as--" he raises his hands to make air quotes, "Entertaining." Then drops said hands back onto the table. "I like

being with you."

He's going to kill me. I will drop dead of a heart attack in the next ten seconds, I swear! My entire body is on fire so it may not be a heart attack that is my end, but rather spontaneous combustion. One way or the other, death is on the way.

"Sometimes your honesty makes i-it hard to r-reply," I admit, shielding my face behind my hands. Matt's response is another intoxicating chuckle.

Our lunches together often consist of endless conversation. Matt is quiet. I'm quiet. When we're together though? We're not so quiet. We discuss movies and books or childhood stories and high school shenanigans. There's an obvious difference in our tales; Matt's often consist of instances that I could never dream of. He hung out with other rich kids mostly whereas I had evening chores with only dreams of the occasional allowance. That's not a complaint, but it's interesting to hear the differences and a little scary that we're getting so close.

How am I meant to handle this ever growing friendship between us? Especially since my heart is wanting much more than friendship.

When lunch ends, we head out to begin our trek to freshman seminar, only it's pouring down rain. Outside the library doors, students are rushing with bags over their heads or power walking with their umbrellas to get to class. I'm about to accept my fate of getting soaked when Matt reaches into his bag to pull out our savior. Once again, he is prepared.

"We can share," he suggests.

"That's ok. I'm fine."

He opens the door, stepping out with the open umbrella while waiting for me. Deja vu anyone? I cannot argue. Well, I could try and fail miserably so I'd rather not. Sighing, I scurry under the umbrella with him that is far too small for two so we're arm to arm. Matt's heat is making me want to run through the rain merely in hopes to cool down.

Matt's height has always been obvious; now even more so. Damn genetics. Both my parents are short. Why is life so tough?

"You should start carrying around an umbrella," he says, seeming to also recall when I borrowed his.

Unfortunately, my dumb ass response is a nervous chuckle that turns into a snort that turns into me burying my face in my jacket like a turtle hiding in his shell. More unfortunately, when we step onto the sidewalk the universe decides to fuck with us.

A car speeds past. The wheels crash into a puddle sending a wave of slush that, somehow, doesn't hit me. I say somehow until my eyes open to realize Matt stepped in front of me and is now completely drenched thanks to him becoming a human shield.

"Matt!" I holler, slack jawed at his drowned rat appearance. His clothes cling to his dirty and damp skin. The umbrella continues to shield us from the rain but, honestly, he'd probably do better to step out and clean off.

"Are you o-ok?" I ask, taking the umbrella from him so he can inspect his phone and wallet. Both were in his pocket. They appear fine. He wipes his face, clearing off some of the dirt to reveal a scowl.

"Physically, yeah, I'm fine."

"Not emotionally?" I grin.

"Mm."

"Why did you do that? Now you're covered."

"We both would have been covered if I didn't," he says like that explains anything. Then he shakes his wet mane like a dog, splattering water everywhere. He grins at my pursed lips after getting a few droplets across my cheeks. I wipe them away.

Giving him a swift once over, I say, "I guess you can't really go to class like that."

"That would be rather uncomfortable. Keep the umbrella. I'm drenched anyways so I can walk to my car."

My brain and my mouth need to get on the same page because a second later I ask, "Why don't you wash up in my dorm?"

Both our eyes widen, although I'm fairly certain mine are on the verge of exploding. Now that is a mental image.

"What about class?" he asks, which is a good question that I've apparently already answered and deemed class to be unimportant. It's a little late to back out now, otherwise I may look like a jerk. Apparently I rather put myself in a flustering situation rather than come across as a jackass. Who knew!

I shrug. "Not like we do anything important in freshman seminar."

"True." Matt gently pushes me aside when another car is about to drive by. My face heats up when his hand lingers on my arm. His touch is warm even through the thick fabric of my jacket.

"If you're ok with that then, I'd appreciate it," he adds.

"I don't r-really have extra clothes that'll f-fit you, but I'll ask Tori if it's ok." His clothes are more likely to fit. Asking Tori though will be informing him that Matt came up. Knowing him, he'll skip class purely to be nosy or he'll ask me a thousand questions once Matt is gone.

Glancing at Matt though, I deem Tori's prodding acceptable for the time being. Matt is drenched. His shoes squeak with every step. He's helped me out more times than I can count. I want to be helpful too. Swiftly texting my friend, I learn soon that he's fine with sparing Matt a few clothes. The following text dooms me to an already foreseen fate; *you will tell me everything.*

The universe really won't let up on me, will it?

We enter the dorm moments later. For once, students aren't crowding around Matt since he's a walking swamp. Some stop and ask if he needs clean clothes or a place to freshen up to which he gives a very harsh no. The cold tone used with others is almost foreign to me at this point, so much so that I'm staring oddly at him in the elevator. The attention is caught.

"What?" he asks with another wipe of a hand over his face. "Is there mud?"

"No, I was only thinking."

He tilts his head in silent questioning.

"You're pretty standoffish with others and I almost forgot what that looked like," I admit with a shrug. "Since I don't see that side of you anymore."

"Standoffish?" he asks with a rapidly blinking gaze.

"Like kind of blunt or even a little mean."

He brings his hand up to his chin, mulling it over enough to tell me that he doesn't see it as that. I want to laugh at how oblivious Matt is to his own nature. At the same time, it's kind of adorable that he merely reacts. In some situations that could be really bad, in others it's exactly what a person needs. He's so blunt and honest that everything he does or says is as true to himself as it could be and that's a rarity. I begin to wonder if he's like that because it's what he wishes from others; honesty.

"Was I ever mean to you?" he asks when the elevator doors open. We step out together, slowly moving our way through the hall.

I shake my head. "I'd argue you were too nice."

He wrinkles the bridge of his nose. "Go on."

"Like when I ruined your clothes."

"Shit happens."

"You lied to everyone that I paid you back."

"They would have bothered you otherwise."

"You protected me from that drunk dude."

Matt scowls at the memory. We're at my dorm room, which swings open when he grumbles, "He started it."

"The list goes on," I add, thinking over the numerous instances that I could bring up. Since we're at the dorm though, I'd rather let him clean up. "Long story short, no, you've always been nice to me."

"Good." He gestures to the bathroom. "Is it ok if I take a shower?"

I give a nod then make sure he has a towel as well as bring over some of Tori's clothes. Once the bathroom door shuts, I'm left alone sitting on my bed watching TV. When the water runs, I up the volume. The sound of the shower is thunderous, more so than the TV even after raising the volume. Has the shower always been that loud? Has my heart always been this loud?

Jitters set in. I get up to pace the room. Not sure how pacing will stop the hammering of my heart, but it's worth a try!

This is a crazy situation; an actor is taking a shower in my dorm. That isn't a thought one has everyday or possibly in their entire life. But as I think that, I begin to feel disgusted. Calling Matt merely an actor is a bit rude, isn't it? Matt is Matt and Matt happens to be an actor. His job is one aspect of him, an aspect that most choose to see over everything else. I don't want to be like that.

Shaking my head, I slip back onto my bed to attempt concentrating on the TV. That doesn't work in the very least, all the way up to Matt finishing up his shower. He exits the bathroom in Tori's clothes. The shirt is a little tight at the shoulders and the basketball shorts have to be tied to stay on his hips, but other than that they work fine. The colors are bright, contrasting against his usual attire. The question of what color doesn't suit him has been answered; all colors suit him. Period.

"Thanks," he says, watching me scurry to get a bag that will hold his damp clothes. There are some grocery bags that we keep to put in the small trash cans we have at the dorm so I grab one of those. Matt stashes his clothes inside, ruffling his damp hair afterwards when glancing about the room. Luckily, it's not a complete mess, but it's practically nothing compared to his apartment.

"Guess there's no point in going to class," he adds when checking his phone.

"Guess not." I retake my spot on the bed. We've missed about twenty minutes of class and, like I said before, wasn't like we were missing much. So...now what?

"Uh, do you wanna watch TV or something?" I gesture towards said TV that's playing some show that was meant to distract me while Matt was showering. Clearly that didn't work.

Matt nods. "Sure."

Shit. Did I want him to say sure or did I want him to go? Why can't I make up my mind? I'm a wreck!

Matt moves further into the room. He surveys the area, more so my side than Tori's. We don't have guests so our room isn't set up for more than us. There are chairs at our desk, but they're pieces of crap given to us by the school. They aren't the least bit comfortable so when Matt goes to sit in one, I quickly call out, "Ah, you c-can sit on the bed."

He raises a brow.

"T-The chairs are...uncomfortable." I said that like sitting with me on a twin sized bed is any less uncomfortable. Still, Matt chooses the bed. If I thought we were close under the umbrella, I don't know what to call this. Stuck like glue?

Matt isn't a beanstalk like me. He can barely fit on a twin sized bed on his own, let alone with someone else. There's the option of Tori's bed. I'm

seriously considering running over to take his side of the room. I doubt he'd care, but Matt's sudden question breaks the tense silence.

"Have you read all these?" He scans over a row of books on my bedside table along with a few on the shelves on the wall. I didn't drag my entire reading collection with me, otherwise there may be no room left for Tori. I brought my favorites though that I re-read from time to time.

"Yeah, these are some of my favorites. I've read each probably three or four times."

Matt retrieves The Blade Itself, flipping open to read the summary. My cheeks warm when his gaze returns to me. There's evident shock in his gaze before he even says, "You don't seem the type to enjoy a story about barbarians and magic."

"I like high fantasy."

"The saying is true, it's always the quiet ones to look out for."

He slips the book back into place. When he settles, there's no denying the heat radiating in the room. The bed's too cramped. We're arm to arm, leg to leg. Matt gently nudges my foot. I question if it's on purpose until he repeats the action. I return the gesture, wondering what the hell I'm thinking, more so when I look up.

Our eyes meet. His eyes are piercing through me, steely-blue that could make arctic ice jealous. This doesn't feel real; the two of us sitting here in a quiet stare that has my entire body screaming. For what? I'm not entirely sure. Maybe to run. Maybe to lean in.

I end up doing nothing because the hero, or the villain, arrives with a grand entrance. The door swings up.

Tori's voice falters mid-sentence, "Dana, give me the de--" He literally skids inside, nearly face planting when spotting Matt and I on the bed. "Oh, hey Matt, you're still here?"

He nods. Somehow it's much colder after he steps off the bed.

"Guess I should get going," he says.

"No, it's fine that you're here!" Tori quickly exclaims, but it's too late. The moment is ruined. I'm glaring at my no good roommate until I realize that I am. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I look away, embarrassed.

What moment am I talking about? Even if Tori didn't come crashing in, nothing would have happened. This is Matt and why would anything happen between us?

"Nah, should probably head home. Thanks for the clothes." Matt looks at me with a soft smile that has me melting on the spot. "See you tomorrow."

Tori's eyes widen at that, but thankfully he says nothing.

"Yeah, tomorrow." I walk Matt to the door, elbowing Tori on the way. He yelps, mumbling a soft apology while waving goodbye to Matt.

The moment the door is shut, Tori is on me like starving hounds on fresh meat. "First, I must humbly apologize for ruining the moment," he says with his hands on my shoulders, spinning me to face him. "Second, I want all the details in a moment but, before that, be honest...were you about to make out?"

I choke on his stupidity, slamming my fist against my chest between hacks, "W-What?!"

"You were, like, this close--" he pinches his fingers ever so slightly together. "To kissing. Don't deny it, I saw it!"

I slap his hands away, rushing around to jump back into bed. "You're crazy." But being in bed makes me remember.

We were close.

Really close.

"And you two are hanging out tomorrow, outside of class?" Tori rushes over, acting as if he has learned of the existence of aliens or alternate dimensions.

"Yeah, s-so?"

Tori stands, hands on his hips, in front of my bed. With stern eyes, he states, "He likes you."

I choke more, which has Tori laughing.

"You're joking," I huff, bug-eyed and probably red faced.

"I'm definitely not. You're joking if you think it's not true!" He jabs me a few times in the chest with a pointed finger. "You two have something going on, or you will have something go on. I can feel it in my bones!"

"Your bones are lying."

"The bones never lie!"

I bury myself in the blankets, hoping to hide from Tori, and maybe myself too. This isn't fair. First there's Matt and now there's Tori building up my hope. I don't want that to happen. I'm scared of the fall.

~

***all the comments probably* DAMN YOU, TORI! Lol but yeah, too bad Tori ruined the moment. What would have happened if he hadn't come in right then? What will happen when they go golfing? Only time will tell! Speaking of time, there may be something exciting dropping in a few days *coughs*Wednesday*cough* so keep your eyes opened for any surprises~**

17. Is Something Burning?

Damn Tori. This is his fault.

I've essentially locked myself in my own bathroom while Matt patiently watches TV until I'm ready to go. Normally a shower after work doesn't take long. Get in, wash off, remove the stench and we're done. Now is an entirely other story.

The heat of the water is too much. I turn it down. Then it's too cold. I raise it. There's steam all through the room. Perhaps it will take me away from my own embarrassment.

He likes you.

As if Tori knows that. He's being ridiculous.

Only my memory chooses to replay yesterday over and over until I see it on the back of my eyelids with every blink. Getting out of the shower means facing Matt. We'll go golfing. Have fun. Maybe grab a bite to eat. Tori's words accompanied by the acts of yesterday will flame the hopeful fire already thoroughly ignited within me. Then when nothing happens the flames will be doused to sputter ash, leaving me cold and gray.

Should I make up a lie? My stomach aches or I'm catching a cold? If only I had the guts.

Free of the stench of work, warmly dressed for the cool autumn day, I step out to spot Matt waiting patiently on my bed. Another reminder of yesterday. Although he's alone, although I'm across the room, the heat somehow returns. My arm breaks out with goosebumps that I fear will never lessen.

"Ready to go?" he asks.

Don't think so. But I don't say that. Only nod.

The lingering trepidation of our day to come diminishes due to Matt's visible eagerness. There's not a hop in his step but certainly a quick pace that sometimes results in my tugging on his sleeve in a request to slow down. Catching the light blush beneath his eyes doesn't just fan the flames. They pour gasoline into the pit.

He likes you.

He doesn't. We're friends. Matt doesn't have many people that he's close to. Of course he's excited to spend time with someone that doesn't view him as a stepping stone into the world of Hollywood. This is an outing between two friends. Nothing more.

Don't get your hopes up, Dana. Why would he like you anyways? The nerdy loser that struggles with typical day to day activities and, compared to those Matt could be with, is a terrible disappointment. He wouldn't settle for someone like me. He's out of my league.

"Are you hungry?" Matt asks in the car. "We could eat now or after."

"A-After. I'm not h-hungry yet." I'm not sure if I will be. All this negativity is giving me indigestion.

The ride consists of music and our lingering silence. If Matt notices the awkward atmosphere, he doesn't show it. I continuously check out of my peripheral, waiting for a frown or shared expression of worry only to find nothing of the sort. He sits almost proudly, humming and tapping his fingers to the tune of every song. It's utterly adorable and worsens the heart problem that I'm fairly certain I developed that day in the cafeteria. Should probably look into going to the doctors. At this rate, I will die before I hit thirty.

The miniature golf court comes into view. A stretch of land off the main road not far out of town. There's a vibrant whale shaped sign at the entrance. On the road into the office, we pass portions of the course that has me sighing in relief. Most of it looks easy enough, small courses with ocean inspired surroundings. There are even a few fountains and ponds. Jitters set

in. I'm uncertain if they are signs of excitement for the course or nerves of who I'm with.

When we get to the office there isn't even time for me to take out my wallet. Actually, neither of us do. Matt states his name and the lady behind the counter smiles. She hands us what we need then wishes us a good game. I glance suspiciously at Matt when we walk out to head for the course.

"I called in earlier since I knew you'd try to pay for yourself otherwise," he explains.

"Here then." I take out my wallet, which only has, like, five dollar cash, but I'll give him the rest later. I try to shove the cash into his hands but he holds his arms above his head, walking as a human pole towards the first course.

"Matt, take the money!"

"No."

"If you don't then...then I'm just going to shove it in your pocket!"

Matt spins so abruptly that I slam into a wall, and by that I mean his chest. Stumbling back, I stare up only to find sparkling eyes peering down at me. They freeze me in place. My hands shake when he leans in to whisper, "Will you really?"

The fire is about to melt me. His eyes are as scorching as the hope burning through my veins. He smirks.

"Ok, go ahead." He leans away.

This is an easy opening. Step closer, slip the five dollars into his pocket then go. Sounds easy enough, right? Probably would be easy for most people, but I'm not most people because I decide to fucking panic.

Get close to Matt? Right, that is going to cause my brain to stop functioning just like it did a second ago. Slip five dollars into his pocket? What is he, a stripper?! I'm an idiot and he knows this idiot well, which is why he's so confident and right that I won't go through with it.

Grumbling, I wave the five dollars at him again. He snickers. Taking my hand, he pushes the money towards me.

"Keep it," he says then walks away, completely unaware of the havoc he's wreaking on me. Ignorance really is bliss.

With that catastrophe set aside, time to begin another.

"Do you want to go first?" Matt asks, to which I shake my head vehemently. "So it's my job to embarrass myself?"

"Absolutely."

"Ah, I see how it is." Matt claims he'll be embarrassed, yet, he gets a hole in one. He's some kind of pro mini golfer, isn't he? I glower at him, which doesn't go unnoticed. Snickering, he steps aside to totally lie to my face, "That was luck."

"Mhm."

Stepping up, I attempt to mimic what he just did. The ball goes flying out of bounds to another course. Matt snorts, pressing a fist to his lips when I spin around to glare at his amusement. He jogs away to retrieve the ball, returning to place it in my open palm.

"Try again. You'll get better," he says.

"Doubt it. I'm not golfing material."

"I think most people aren't."

My next hit is somewhat better, but still ricochet's off the side to hit me in my foot. I hiss, shoulders slumping forward. This is going to take a while, which I should feel down about. In the back of my mind, I'm choosing to linger on how that means we'll have a lot more time together.

You're hopeless, Dana.

"You don't need to hit it so hard," Matt says, earning another scowl from me. My scowls aren't all that frightening seeing as all he does is grin. "Want me to show you?"

"Yes, please teach me, you filthy lying pro golfer."

That was a mistake. Teaching me golf doesn't register until Matt is standing behind me. His arms wrap around me to encase my hands over the handle. Although the autumn air is cool, my skin is scorching. There's a furnace between us. Matt's voice tickles my ears when he says, "Don't put so much force into it."

He moves my arms for me. The golf ball hits its mark. I don't hear it like I did Matt's seeing as my heart beat is ringing in my ears from how close we are. I swear I feel his heart beating against my back. I worry he may feel my own.

"There you go." He finally allows me to breathe when stepping away. "You'll be a pro mini golfer in no time."

I don't know about that. With Matt around, it's hard to focus on my new dream of being a pro mini golfer. There's always nerves coursing through me from head to toe. He's too close. He's too far away. We're too quiet. His voice is too intoxicating. No matter what he does, it's too extreme for me to handle. I want to stay and leave all at once.

Let me repeat, damn you, Tori! This wouldn't be so hard if he hadn't said something so stupid. Hope can destroy you, if you let it.

We move from course to course with surprising ease. Our scores are close, although Matt continues to be ever so slightly ahead until the last few holes. I get two holes in one resulting in my minuscule but damn exciting victory.

"Who's the filthy lying pro mini golfer now?" Matt teases. I'm beaming, practically skipping the last few steps to the office where we drop off our stuff.

"You let me win, didn't you?" I ask on our way to the car.

"No. You won fair and square."

"I smell lies."

"What exactly do lies smell like?"

"Shit."

Matt's laughter warms my ears. I'm supposed to not get my hopes up, but the more time we spend together the worse it gets.

"What do you want for dinner?" he asks. I'm buckling my seatbelt when he starts the engine. There's a lie on the tip of my tongue; I'm not feeling well, let's call it a day. I know that's the route I should take in hopes to lessen the inevitable fall.

Apparently, I don't fear heights.

"I'm fine with anything."

Matt hums. He must have an idea of where to go seeing as he pulls out of the lot. Music returns. Tapping and hums resume. My fingers twist into the end of my jacket. The fabric will tear if I keep this up, but the nerves won't take a break. They're working their asses off to make sure I'm a wreck all the way to the restaurant.

The baseball cap has returned. Matt keeps his gaze low when we step inside. Once we're in a corner booth, he adjusts the cap so he doesn't look like a complete creeper. Of course, I'd take the creeper over eye contact seeing as eye contact is somehow more dangerous. One look has me shielding my face with the menu. I take a single peak only to be met with an amused smile. The menu is brought up again for protection from the rays of light across the table.

"Did you have fun?" he asks.

"Yeah. I won."

He snorts. "Is that the only reason it was fun?"

"It was a strong contributing factor."

Our waiter comes by to take our orders. That means he removes my shield, aka the menu, leaving me to jitter openly for Matt to see. He raises a brow, clearly noting my shakes.

"Something wrong?"

I lie through my teeth. "O-Oh, uh, no, just hungry."

"Do you usually work on the weekends?" he suddenly asks.

"Yeah, Friday to Sunday I've usually got morning shift."

"Sounds rough."

"I always thought waking up at six would stop after high school, but I'm doomed to do it through college too. Being an actor has weird hours too though, I'm sure."

Matt nods. "I was at a shoot for thirty six hours once. Slept curled up under a table with my shoes as a pillow."

My jaw drops. The disbelief is obvious. Matt nods more to tell me he isn't joking.

"I thought actors had, like, trailers or something."

"Sometimes, depending on the location and once you're big enough. I didn't have one when I was younger."

"But your mom was around, wasn't she?" I ask, but the mention of his mother has Matt tensing. There's visible frustration in his gaze but now his voice.

"Once I was old enough to watch out for myself, she wasn't really around. If she was, she was sucking up to some director in hopes to earn me some more lines or possibly advertise her company." He waves his hand dismissively. "A business woman through and through."

"Sorry. I-I didn't mean to bring her up."

"It's fine." He shrugs.

"Do you plan to pick up work again?"

Matt tilts his head.

"Are you going to go back to dramas or movies?" I explain.

"I don't know, honestly," he replies while twirling the straw in his drink. The ice clinks against the glass. "I want to go back eventually, but don't know when I should. Starting up school was my way of at least getting out of the house."

"And would you say you're happy with that? Starting school, I mean."

Matt stills. Cool blue eyes darken. With a coy smile, he whispers, "Yeah, I'm happy I did."

Am I meant to respond? If so, I don't know how. There's a mini-Tori screaming in my head. I want to kick him out, but I can't move. Matt's gaze is stuck to me like glue until, thankfully, our waiter returns with food. I take a breath, swearing I can taste the flames of hope scorching my throat.

Dinner is eaten mostly in silence, which isn't an oddity between the two of us. Quiet people tend to make quiet company, although when we're together we also tend to never shut up. Seems we're both sides of extreme. I'm uncertain if Matt notices the tension here either. Almost every time I catch his eye, he smiles or his eyes seem to brighten at the attention. Not that I'm any better. As if it's instinct, I smile back or nervously choke on my drink when trying to hide my own nerves. I'm a freaking mess.

And this mess is somehow dreading the drive back to the dorm. Although we've spent most of our afternoon together and I humiliated myself more often than not, I wish our time together would drag on longer. There's a voice in the back of my head trying to make up an excuse to see each other tomorrow or Sunday. Let's go see a movie or go to a cafe around campus or

play video games at the dorm, something, anything. But those thoughts never escape my lips, not even when Matt finally pulls up to the dorms.

This is the part where I leave, but I haven't moved yet. Matt hasn't asked me why either.

"Why don't we make this a thing?" Matt asks, resulting in my unbelievable confusion. He chuckles at the knitted brow I'm sporting. "Doing something different on a Friday night. Maybe we can make plans to try go kart riding or something."

I laugh at the mere idea of driving a go kart. "I'd die. I am a terrible driver."

"Something else then."

I give a slow nod, dooming myself to more of this torment because I'm a sucker for punishment. Seeing Matt's smile only worsens my insanity because I don't regret my decision. I will later though, I'm sure.

"Thanks for today. We can talk more about what we wanna do on Monday." I go to head out the door only to be stopped by a hand wrapping around my wrist. The warmth of Matt's hold seeps into my skin that shivers from the touch. Slowly, I risk facing him, and am met with a peculiar sight.

Matt's blushing. There's no doubt about it. His cheeks are tinted a faint pink that only worsens as he proves, yet again, that brutal honesty is what he's best at; "I'm sorry if this is too sudden, but I don't like beating around the bush."

I raise a confused brow.

"I like you, Dana," he says, not with the exaggerated conviction from the shows, but rather raw honesty that takes my breath away. The soft blue of his eyes now mirror the depths of soothing ocean waves that threaten to drag me in.

We've clearly gotten into a car wreck and this is a coma because there's no way he really said that. Except I'm not waking up no matter how much I

wait. Matt's touch remains. He leans in. My lungs ache for air. The car is a furnace, trapping us in walls of searing heat. The hope is banging against my ribcage, the fire threatening to tear me apart from within.

"I want to kiss you," he whispers, lips already dangerously close. My gaze flicks to them, watching them grow closer with every word. "If you don't want this, please tell me."

How the hell am I meant to form a coherent sentence during a time like this? Or the time given to me between Matt's patience for a response and his inevitable movement.

I don't know how much time passes before he closes the distance, catching my lips in a kiss like cool spring showers. Soft and hesitant. A soothing pressure against my lips then tentative movements, as if testing the waters. A gentle touch of his hand against my cheek. Fingers in my hair and my own in his. The baseball cap falls. I don't know where nor do I care. I don't remember reaching out for him. I don't know how we go from a nervous peck to breathy open mouthed kisses. I don't really care about that either.

I'm fixated on the rush, the excitement and relief of not falling, but soaring.

~

Bet y'all didn't expect that, did ya? LE SMOOCHY, SMOOCH! You're welcome ^^ What's going to happen now? Will Dana and Matt make this official? Could Dana handle the pressure of dating someone in the spotlight?

18. Carousels Are Only Fun at Parks

We sit facing ahead, at least, I'm assuming we both are. Matt doesn't say a word. Neither do I. Although it's the middle of fall, the air is sticky and humid. I'm short of breath even after the kiss has ended for--I glance at the radio--six minutes. Considering how long we were lost in the moment, maybe that is understandable. My lips are tingling. I press the back of my hand to them. Memories of our kiss flash, the sensation of Matt's lips, his scent in every breath, the visions surround me until I question what's real and what isn't.

"Did I upset you?" Matt asks, shattering the silence and escalating my panic.

"H-Huh?" I swing my head around fast, cracking my neck in the process. "W-What? N-N-No, why...no, definitely n-not! I, uh, t-the kiss was-was great!"

"Really?" He smirks, the taunting smile reaching his far too enticing eyes.

"Y-You know w-what I m-mean."

"Yeah." He nods. The tips of his ears are red. "So you don't...regret it, right?" He searches for an answer by looking me over. The attention has me swallowing hard.

"Regret?" I shake my head. To save myself, I look away. Meeting Matt's gaze is dangerous. I fear I'll drown in those ocean eyes. "No, uh, I guess I don't...understand."

"Understand?"

"You-you s-s-said you like...me?" The mere thought has me twisting my fingers painfully into my pants. The knuckles are fierce white. My nerves

twist into throbbing knots, humming within me like the buzzing of drills. "Why me? I don't--you could h-have anyone. I'm a nobody. I'm-I'm just some s-short, scrawny, f-freckled dork-"

"You're cute," Matt interrupts. His voice is almost stern. "You're sweet. You're funny-"

"You must have terrible taste in humor."

He snorts. "You never give yourself enough credit. You're too nice for your own good sometimes. You're hardworking. You respected me from day one."

I face him in order to ask, "What do you mean?"

"You tried to pay me back for spilling food on my shirt." He chuckles. The smile he wears is so warm that it could chase away a winter storm. "How many people wanted you to do that purely because of who I am? How many didn't want you to purely because of who I am? And who is the one that told me it didn't matter whether I had money or not, paying me back was simply the right thing to do?"

Words try to form in my mouth. They crumble and fade away. Not Matt's though. He continues on, speaking as color blossoms beneath his eyes. "Maybe this sounds lame." He rubs the back of his neck. "But, you're really cool, Dana."

Cool? That isn't a word that I'd ever associate with myself. Matt though? Definitely. Cool. Admirable. Respectable. All of that and more, but he's trying to tell me I'm the cool one? I would laugh, but he's being serious. Matt is blunt, that's somehow both a good and bad quality. Good because you know he is being honest with you. Bad because sometimes he's too honest.

"Everyday I find something else to like about you," he adds as if he hasn't already burnt me to a crisp with his confession already. "But I get it if--" he rolls his shoulders. "If you don't feel the same. I'm sorry if this felt forced on you, or something."

Out of the two of us, the last person I expected to be self-conscious is Matt. Why would he ever have any reason to be? Especially in comparison to me. But he sits silently in the driver seat. Wrists resting on the wheel and hands limp as he gazes at the floor where his feet tap impatiently together.

There's a fork in the road with no clues of what awaits at the end. All I know is one leads to a relationship with Matt and another leads to a friendship falling apart. As much as I would like to think I could deny him and we'd remain friends, I don't have faith in myself. I like him. I like him a lot, but he's Matthew Jeneviere. He isn't some cute boy from nextdoor or even the cliche high school bad boy. He's a celebrity, someone with a past and a future I can't even fathom.

I've seen what has happened when put in the spotlight. Imagine if others discover the dumbass cafeteria boy is now somehow dating the campus heart throb. Imagine if Matt picks back up his career, there is no doubt what others will say. I can hear the taunts and disbelief of Matt dating someone like me. Is that something I can handle? Is that something we both can handle?

I don't know. But I don't want to hurt his feelings by speaking of these worries either. What if I make him feel bad? Then again, lying that I don't feel the same will also make him feel bad. Why is life overly complicated?

"I-It's not like that," I whisper. I keep away, admiring the setting sun outside. "I-I like you too."

There's movement, the soft squeaking of leather seats.

"But?" he whispers.

The answer rests on the tip of my tongue. The silence is deafening, and yet, I rather bask in silence than speak.

"What will h-happen if others find out though?" My hands fumble with the end of my jacket. I worry over my bottom lip. Disappointment rumbles in my chest, settling like dry cement in my gut.

I'm a coward.

"I understand," he says.

I hate it. I hate that he understands. I hate that I asked. I wish I was strong.

"We don't have to tell. I've never really been open about my relationships before anyways. It is better that way," he says and, for once, I question if that's a lie. Shame weighs me down.

"That's not fair to you. Y-You should be able to be o-open about this." I've ripped through the fabric of my jacket. My fingers tear at the newly exposed strings, tugging on them the same as the shame is ripping apart my nerves.

Matt takes my hand. He slips his fingers between mine. Using the hold, he guides me closer. I refuse to look at him even when I see him out of my peripheral vision. He's leaning over, speaking softly, "It's not fair to throw you in the spotlight either. It's hard, even for those that are used to it, but...but if you really don't want to then...then we can stay friends."

"Can we?" I ask when finally facing him. There's no denying the answer written into his narrowed gaze, and likely shown through my own scowl.

"Why don't you take some time to think about it then?" he suggests with a reassuring smile.

I nod because I do like the sound of that. "Give me the weekend?"

"Ok."

"I'm sorry--"

"Don't be," he interjects. "This is a bit outside of the norm so your reaction is more than understandable."

That's what I hate. I hate that they're understandable. I hate that I didn't prove to Matt in this moment that I'm brave and strong enough to be with

him regardless of what the future holds. I wish I didn't hesitate. I wish I ran. Ran even when my legs ached and lungs cried.

"See you on Monday then?" he asks.

"Yeah."

His grip loosens. I hold tight, pulling him closer so I can at least give him this; a swift kiss that I hope is a little reassurance for the both of us. His eyes are wide. He blinks rapidly, a smile twitching on his lips only after I've gotten out of the car.

"Bye." I wave to him, relishing in his still stunned expression.

The air is frigid against my heated skin. I shiver on the walk to the dorms. In the elevator, I rest my head against the cool metal interior. It does nothing to help my searing cheeks. Neither does my slow walk to my room where I ignore Tori's immediate questions to hide in the locked bathroom.

My back meets the door. I slide to the tile floor. My fingers trace the moldings as I go over today's events.

Can I find my courage in a weekend?

~

It's unfortunate that I worry speaking to Tori about my dilemma that has consumed me all the way to Sunday evening. With no answer in sight, I've grown more and more hateful towards myself until I actually snarl at my own reflection. Insults parade themselves through my mind. Thunderous noise without consonance. Raging and consuming to the edge of madness where I drown in wallowing misery. There's no end in sight.

Tori has asked time and time again what's wrong. He sits at the desk or in bed watching. He flinches when I curse under my breath, asks if I'm alright when I randomly kick about my bed like a kid throwing a tantrum. I suppose right now, that's what I am. A child angry with themself for not having the courage to face their own demons. There's a monster under my

bed of my own creation and I'm letting it torment me because I'm too frightened to really do anything about it.

Is this really the type of person Matt wants to be with? I'm a disappointment to myself. Imagine a relationship.

At times I consider asking Tori what I'm meant to do, but, deep down, I actually worry over his response. Not to say that he isn't supportive, obviously he is, but he's a chatterbox. What happens if he tells Chelsea or Rose and they tell another? Then the campus knows, then the paparazzi, then we have some magazine or gossiping youtuber chasing me for another story. Now I hate myself about not fully trusting him. All aboard the self hate train!

But I can't come up with an answer myself. I've thought it over, but my brain is a carousel that never ends. I've purchased a one way ticket where I sit in a continuous loop, listening to the same ludacris song on repeat. I'm scared. I'm worried. I don't want to hurt Matt. I don't want to hurt myself either. Am I being over dramatic? Am I thinking about this too much? I need someone to give me a hint, point me in the direction I'm meant to go or even crush my hopes into dust.

"You heading out?" Tori softly asks when I drag my feet to the door.

"Making a call," I answer, clutching my phone in my grasp. He gives a slow nod, watching with obvious concern as I step out the door. I curl in on myself as if I actually think anyone is watching or somehow able to see my thoughts. I want to disappear into the floor even when no one is around. Stepping into the lounge, I double check no one is listening and make a call.

"My little brother is actually calling me of his own accord? What happened? You need money, loser?" Bridget giggles. Her voice is soothing. I miss her.

"No, I, uh, just wanted to talk."

"Yeah?" She hums. There is no way she doesn't know something is up. I can't keep the sorrow from my voice even if I tried. "What's up?"

"I need you to talk some sense into me."

"That's my speciality. Go on!"

I don't know where to begin. Hell, I don't know if she'll even believe me. We've messaged from time to time. She knows about the incident with Matt, but not that we're friends or...well, what has happened now. Then again, there is no reason I would lie about this either.

Searching the lounge again, I curl up into one of the couches and whisper the situation to her. She listens quietly as I express how the kiss with Matt came about and my current fears. The more I say them out loud the worse I feel. My chest is caving in on itself. My head throbs with a headache that, honestly, hasn't left since Friday night. But Bridget takes it all in.

"Wow." She whistles at the end of my story. "This sounds like something my twelve year old self would dream about."

"Bridget. This is serious."

"Yeah, no shit." She sighs. Silence follows as she puts her thoughts together. Then, after a deep breath, she tells me exactly what I needed to hear, "You're not being dramatic. Your worries are perfectly reasonable."

The weight disintegrates.

"But you can't let other's rule over your life," she adds. "This is your life. This is a choice between the two of you. What a bunch of strangers say or think don't fucking matter. They are bugs on the windshield, wipe that shit away. I'm not saying it'll be easy, I honestly don't know what will happen, but I'll tell you what I do know after hearing the way you talk about him." She sighs again, sounding sympathetic. "If you give him up now, you'll never forgive yourself, Dana."

I know.

"What if I get cold feet?" I whisper. "What if...I'm always too scared to tell others about us?"

"You'll cross that bridge if you get there. Stop focusing on the if's and focus on the now's, because right now you have an absolutely stunning man wanting your affections. Enjoy that. Bask in those beautiful baby blues, holy fuck, I hate you!" She suddenly hollers causing me to laugh for the first time in a few days. "Matthew fucking Jeneviere, are you serious?! How did you not melt until those arms the second he kissed you? I would have been on my back in a second!"

"Bridget..."

"Who cares what anyone thinks when you have a smokin' hot man to smother you with compliments! All I need is one, one compliment from him and I'd ascend."

"I don't think that's healthy."

"What's not healthy is your ability to even think about telling him no. Something is wrong with you. See a doctor."

My cheeks hurt from my smile. "So do you just want me to tell him yes because he's hot?" I ask, chuckling at her exaggerated gasp.

"I would never! As your loving sister, I want what is best for you and if you like him then go for it!" She giggles like a mad woman. "Him being super hot is merely a perk."

"Uh huh."

I'm glad I called. She's right. If I step away now, I'll regret this choice forever.

~

What do you think Dana's answer will be? Our poor boys just wanna looooooove~

19. Nervous Nerves

The time taunts me. The light of my phone burns my eyes even when the brightness is swiftly lessened. I'm out of bed ahead of my alarm blaring. Actually, one could argue I didn't even sleep. I've been tossing and turning all evening, envisioning all the scenarios that may play out today. But I've made up my mind and I know, no matter how much I go over what I want to say, once I see Matt I'll forget every word.

Since we don't share a class on Monday, technically, we aren't meant to see each other. However, we've been having lunch together so, to make sure that's still a go, I shoot him a quick text.

Me: Morning

Ah...I don't know what time he wakes up.

Me: Sorry if I woke you up...

Matt: Morning. No worries, I was up.

Me: Meet up at the library for lunch like usual?

Matt: Sounds good

Staring at our message, I wonder what he's thinking. Is he as nervous as I am? Has he been worried all weekend? Am I a jerk for hoping so? Liking someone is strange. We don't want them in pain, yet we hope they are as troubled about us as we are them. Guess we all turn into a bit of a hypocrite when we like someone, huh?

Of course, the promise of meeting up at lunch while knowing what I want to say makes getting ready much harder than usual. I'm acting like a dork on their first date and...well, I guess that's...sort of true. If everything works out then this will be my first "real" relationship. Again, not sure if my boyfriend

at 14 counts as an actual relationship. It was more cute, nothing happened, but with Matt...

I shake my head, dispersing the thoughts of our possible future together. I can't imagine anything! We need to see how we work out now, like Bridget said. Focus on the now, Dana!

In the bathroom, I check my appearance longer than ever. Not that I know how to change my appearance. Tori has some hair product but, honestly, I've never tried it out and I'm too nervous to mess up so badly it's unsalvageable now. In the end, I get to class almost ten minutes late thanks to my fretting. Tori notices this, but he must sense my nerves because, for once, he doesn't pry. I'm grateful that even he has boundaries.

Time continues to torment me. The minutes span into hours. I swear each time I glance at the clock, we somehow go back a minute. Lectures become nothing more than background noise to my raging nerves. The only sound ringing in my ears is that of my rapidly beating heart that refuses to give me a moment of reprieve. There's no point trying to pay attention in class. I'll have to read the notes over again later.

By the time lunch arrives, I'm a nervous wreck, which is saying a lot considering how much of a nervous wreck I usually already am. I'm surprised my teeth aren't chattering on my walk to the library.

"You got this," I whisper to myself when stepping through the doors. "You already know he likes you back. Why are you freaking out? Stop it. Be cool. Be cool."

As if telling myself to be cool will somehow make me cool. Pretty sure it does the opposite.

While in the elevator, I notice something is off. I'm not entirely sure what until I move through the fourth floor to find Matt sitting at the usual table.

Our food! I forgot to ask what he wanted to eat!

Too late to go back now seeing as Matt has spotted me. He stands up, knocking his knee against the table leg in the process with a pained hiss. I snort, lowering my head to keep him from spotting my amusement. That lightened the atmosphere a little.

"Hey," Matt greets me with a wave that I mirror.

"Hi."

We're silent, and it has nothing to do with being in the library.

"Uh...s-sorry, I forgot to get food."

Matt blinks rapidly. He glances to the table then my empty hands. "Ah, I guess it is lunch."

"Yep."

We both look away.

Holy shit, this is awful!

"Why don't we sit down?" he suggests. I happily plop down into a chair while Matt sits across from me. I don't know how he can maintain eye contact now. I last a second before averting my gaze.

I need to come out and say it. Please, Matt, lend me some of your bluntness.

"About, um, what happened F-Friday--" why the hell did I start it like that?! "I mean, what I-I've been thinking this weekend or, um, that's not right either, is it? Just...I like you, obviously, and I really, really don't want to run away because of what might happen. I do think we should keep this quiet, for now, but I do w-want to give this, or I mean, us a try."

I want to jump into a ravine. Throwing my head into my hands, I groan, "Sorry, that didn't make any sense, did it?"

I'm met with silence. A silence that worries me enough to chance a look. What I'm met with is a peculiar sight; Matt sitting across from me with a

face redder than a firetruck. He's smiling goofily when whispering, "So...we're dating, right?"

I have to hide again when nodding.

He releases a heavy sigh. I peek through my fingers to find him leaning against the table, still wearing that goofy smile that only gets bigger when noticing he has my attention. I go back to hiding completely and he laughs.

"I thought you were going to say no," he whispers, which has my gut twisting with guilt. This morning I was hoping he was fretting about it and now I'm feeling guilty that he did.

"I still think you have terrible taste."

He snorts. "I have great taste." There's rummaging across from me. Then a hand takes my own, removing my shield so that I have to face Matt smiling down at me. "Come on, let's go get lunch."

"Do we have time?" I mumble while letting him pull me to my feet.

I'm about to check the time on my phone when he says, "Let's skip." My face heats up considerably when he adds, "Since today is our first, we can have an official date."

I'm surprised the books haven't caught fire with the heat I'm probably exuding. With Matt so close, his hand in mine, and his charming smile, I feel like at any moment I'm going to melt into a puddle of goo. That actually might be an improvement with how out of it I am, so much so that I can't really respond other than a dumb nod. One that has him chuckling.

Matt scans the area behind us. There are bookshelves on either side, shielding us mostly from view. Upon realizing there is nowhere else around, or at least no one nearby, he reaches up to press his hand against my warm cheeks. He leans in, hesitating. His hand is tense and maybe I get why considering how I'm acting. So before he can change his mind, I swiftly close the gap between us, catching him in a surprising kiss.

When we break apart, I'm relieved to see our blushes mirror each other. Even Matt's naturally resting bitch face has softened thanks to the dusting of pink across his face.

"Come on," he insists, holding my hand all the way up to the elevator. I already dislike how we break apart prior to the doors opening. Matt seems to feel the same because he links our fingers behind his back while in the elevator. I had no idea he'd be this freaking adorable and I may actually die if he keeps this up!

When we reach outside of the library, I spot Joey eating lunch on one of the picnic benches. Matt is texting him, I imagine, which is proven correct when Joey checks his phone. He peers about, spotting us and Matt pointing to the garage. Joey waves him off, returning to eat.

"Told him we're leaving so he can head home," Matt explains while we head for the parking garage. "What are you in the mood for?"

"Food."

Matt rolls his eyes. "What kind of food?"

"The good kind."

"Steak?"

"The good kind, not the expensive kind."

"Why not? I'm paying."

I stubbornly shake my head. "That's not how this is going to work."

His hum states that he disagrees. "Oh? How is *this* going to work then?"

"I'm paying for myself."

The snort he responds with is almost insulting.

"I'm serious!"

"Uh huh." He steps up to his car, smirking from the driver's side while I fling open the passenger door.

"You can't buy me with money," I tease while slipping into the car.

We're backing out of the lot when he asks, "Do I even have to try that at this point?"

My blush is answer enough.

He smirks. "Besides, I should spend money on what I like, right?"

I sink lower into the seat.

"Steak it is then." He announces and I can't really argue when he sounds so happy to go. I feel this is going to be a recurring theme. I'm doomed.

I twist the end of my shirt in my hand, wondering if it's alright to request holding hands in the car. That's normal, right? And we're...wow, we're dating. Yeah, I'm dating Matthew Jeneviere. Let that sink in for a moment.

I'm really, really doomed.

More so when Matt somehow reads my mind and takes hold of my hand. I have to be red up to my ears, but that doesn't stop me from linking our fingers. I could get used to this.

"Did you tell Joey why we were skipping?" I ask. He is Matt's bodyguard, and while he doesn't follow us around off campus, maybe Matt thought it'd be best to tell him.

"No, although he probably already has an idea of what's going on," he admits. "I've known him for years and he's annoyingly observant. Kinda makes me pity his wife, or maybe that's a good thing? Who knows."

I start to grin. "So, what exactly did he *observe* about you that would make him think there's something going on between us?"

Matt clears his throat. Shifts in his seat.

I lean over to whisper, "Did you talk about me?"

"No." He answered that way too quickly.

"What did you say?"

"What about you?" He challenges. "You probably talked with someone about me over the weekend, right?"

I wish I had a poker face because right now I really need it. Matt can easily get his answer by merely looking at me. Now it's his turn to whisper, "Did you talk about me?"

"I plead the fifth."

Matt rubs his thumb over the back of my hand. It's soothing so I do the same to him. It's hard to believe that this is real. Somehow I went from spilling food on the school heartthrob to dating him, which isn't an outcome I ever thought possible for me. I'm glad though, that I'm taking this chance. Who knows how we'll play out, but isn't that an issue with every relationship? We never know where the end might be or if there will even be an end.

Sometimes, most times actually, I get so lost in my thoughts that I imagine the worst possible outcome and cling to it as a reason to decline something that could be really great. This could be really great and, even if I'm worried about others discovering and if I can handle that, I want to at least try. That way, if it does fail, at least I know we did our best to make it work.

"Do you mind if I tell my sisters?" Matt asks, which I'm actually surprised to hear. He explains, "They'll want to hang out again and I promise they'll pick up that something is going on."

That makes me laugh and give in, "Sure, that's fair...considering I did kind of talk about you with my sister over the weekend."

"Yeah?"

"She's a fan."

Matt chuckles. "How'd she take the news?"

"Pretty sure she hates me, but if you meet her one day, she'll probably be happy."

"Guess we'll have to make plans eventually for me to meet her." Matt stiffens, probably because he realized what he just implied. "Not that we, uh, have to meet family immediately or anything, just...a possibility."

His nerves are worsening my own.

At least it's nice to know that we're both ridiculous.

~

Awwwww, our boys are officially dating, aren't they adorable?! Will things work out between them? :)

20. Queen Bee Marceline

Secretly dating isn't something I had written into my calendar. Then again, secretly dating an actor isn't something I ever expected either, and yet, here I am. Sneaking around not only my roommate, but also the entire campus, is becoming easier by the day. Matt and I spend our lunches in the library where we're away from prying eyes. Occasionally we go out after classes, not like anyone would think too much of us going to the movies or anything, but, we hang out at least half of the time at Matt's apartment. With his insane movie collection and massive TV, it's basically like a home theater.

Although it's been a week, I'm still waiting for the inevitable awakening where my eyes actually open and I'm in a hospital room where the doctor tells me I've been in a coma and all this has been a dream. Especially when I sit on Matt's couch and he plops next to me, cuddling into my side with a bowl of jalapeno popcorn. He smiles when my gaze is caught. Tilts his head curiously. Then offers me some popcorn, which he happily feeds to me. Yeah, it's dream-like, and I kind of hope that if this is a coma, nobody will wake me up.

"What do you wanna watch?" Matt asks, flipping on the TV, which has so many options that I can't begin to fathom what to choose from. He's subscribed to just about every TV and movie related app there is because Matt truly is a movie buff, drama buff, anything to do with TV buff.

"Something spooky," I answer since that is the mood I'm currently in. Not to say that I'm not scared, but it is the middle of the afternoon, which is the only time I can watch anything spooky related without giving myself nightmares. Not to mention Matt is here so I always do better with someone around.

"Spooky it is."

We're searching through the wide selection of horror movies when there's a sudden knock at the door. We looked at one another, me questioning if he forgot to tell me his sisters were visiting. However, his nonchalant shrug states he's as clueless as I am. Clueless turns to concern when the door opens. He's off the couch and rushing over to the doorway before I have time to blink. I reach for my phone though, just in case.

"Mom," Matt calls, standing motionless. I freeze too, listening to the soft clicking of heels then focusing on the woman that comes waltzing into the living room.

Marceline Jeneviere is as fierce as one would expect of a self made millionaire. Waves of pitch black hair rest over thin shoulders while blood red lips contrast against pale skin. The clothes she wears are cream in color with golden accents, perfectly fitted to her thin, model-like figure. She's almost threatening, standing there with golden sunglasses that she slides from her slim nose to reveal cold blue eyes. Those eyes are fixated on me.

"What are you doing here?" Matt asks, swiftly stepping in front of me. I'm grateful for reasons unknown. Marceline's gaze gives me the shivers.

"Can't a mother come by to visit her son?" Marceline sighs. Even her voice is commanding, although she asked a simple question it feels almost taunting.

"It's polite to inform someone prior to a visit."

"My apologies then. I'll call next time." She steps around Matt, who shifted his gaze between me and her. She sits elegantly in the loveseat, crossing one long leg over the other. Again, she's watching me, sitting there like she owns the place.

"Whose this?" She asks, clearly speaking of me. "Odd for you to invite someone to your place."

"A friend," Matt answers, which is rather telling. I recall that he said she was very controlling. Perhaps she tries to control his friends and romantic partners as well? His sisters already know about us but not his mom so

that's a huge red flag. I offer up what I hope to be a kind smile. She doesn't return the gesture.

"Dana, this is my mom, obviously." Matt gives a lazy gesture towards her. "Mom, this is Dana, from school."

I wave. "Nice to meet you."

"If you're going to be here long, I'll take Dana home," says Matt. His voice is distant, posture cold, like what he gives to those on campus. His eyes are suddenly dim, returning to the icy fortress he keeps up in front of others. I know they don't have the best relationship, but this is worse than expected. Matt treats Marceline like he would a stranger or an acquaintance. It's as if he's waiting for her to do something to set him off.

"No, I won't be long," she swiftly explains, digging into the designer bag brought with her. I imagine it's worth an entire semester of my college tuition. She pulls out a stack of papers, holding them out for Matt. He takes them hesitantly, reading over the front page as she says, "Some offers for you. Thought I'd deliver them personally so we could talk but--" she glances at me. "Since you have a guest, we can speak another time."

Marceline stands, flipping her sunglasses back on. It's hard to imagine she's a mother of four. She barely looks like she's out of her early thirties, but I suppose that's what happens when you have money and good genes. Look at Matt and his ridiculously good looks, his sisters too. The whole family is gorgeous. Life is unfair!

Matt sighs. "I'll look at them."

"Good. Let me know if any catch your interest." Marceline heads for the door, turning once to face me. "Next time I'll visit when I'm not busy so the three of us can have dinner. What do you think, Dana?"

I think that I have to nod eagerly and pretend I like the idea although my gut is telling me otherwise. Smiling, I sputter, "S-Sounds great."

Marceline smirks. Matt follows her to the door. I'm not sure if they say anything more to each other. Shortly after, the door shuts and locks. I hear Matt mutter something about changing the locks before reappearing with a furrowed brow. His face is slightly red, like he's holding back anger.

"Uh...you ok?" I ask, frowning when his wide eyes meet mine. It's like he forgot I was here for a second.

"Fine," he snaps. His movements are robotic towards the office area. He practically slams the stack of papers on the desk then slams the doors shut. He flinches, taking another breath prior to joining me back on the couch. "What were we going to watch?"

"Hadn't picked anything yet," I mutter, shoving another handful of popcorn in my mouth.

Matt's demeanor continues to be off. He's picking at his nails again, which I quickly stop by grabbing his hand. His muscles are tense, like someone poured cement into his veins and let it all settle.

"Sorry," he whispers, rubbing his thumb over the back of my hand. He refuses to meet my gaze. "I didn't...I didn't think she'd show up."

"It's ok, not like she was here long."

"Doesn't matter. You shouldn't have had to meet her."

"I mean, I would have to eventually, she's your mom."

He snorts. "Yeah...yeah, I guess so."

He grabs the remote. Silence rears its ugly head. Normally that isn't an issue with us, but right now it is. The silence comes from Matt's discomfort that ripples through the apartment like a heavy fog. I want to ask, but also want to give him his privacy. I want to offer help, but don't even know where to begin. Suppose being here is start enough?

"We can talk if you need to," I say, earning a raised brow.

"Talk?"

"About anything."

Judging by his tilted head, I don't think he caught my drift.

"If something is troubling you whether it's what's happening now or, y'know, before, we-we can talk," I explain, nibbling at my bottom lip.

Matt brushes his thumb over my bottom lip, stopping me from my bad habit too. His actions bring about a brush that only worsens when he leans in for a quick kiss then another and another.

"Thanks," he whispers, resting his head on my shoulder. His hair is soft, tickling my neck that breaks out with goosebumps. "I'll tell you more one day, just...not now. It's not, I mean, it's not like I don't trust you--"

"You don't need to explain."

Matt looks up at me.

"I get it." I offer him a smile that he slowly mirrors. "When you're ready, I'll be here."

"Really?" He grins. "And what about long after?"

I know what he's insinuating and I almost hate that he can ask it so easily while I struggle to sputter, "I'll s-still be here."

"What was that?" He leans up. "I couldn't hear you. Say it again."

"No." I pout. "You should have listened harder."

Matt chuckles. That's the first sign that he's feeling better. Feels like we can both breathe again. We choose a random horror movie that ends up being some cheap film that has us both laughing rather than screaming. Suppose that's a good thing seeing as Matt relaxes enough to act like earlier never happened. His arm is around me, holding me close while munching on popcorn and giggling over horrible CGI and piss poor writing.

That doesn't stop me from wondering though, wondering about Matt's relationship with his mom. He admitted that she was controlling, that she got him into acting, or rather, forced him into it. I can only imagine what he went through as a kid being in the spotlight. Hell, he goes through enough now when he's old enough to understand and it's still tough. But what could have happened to make them get this bad? I can't imagine, seeing as my relationship with my parents is great. I'm very lucky in that regard.

Like I promised though, I won't ask. Matt will tell me when he's ready and, I hope, one day he will be.

~

Mama Marceline paid a visit o.o Will Matt ever tell Dana about the past with his mom? What could it be?

21. Confidence? Never Heard of Her!

"You've been acting strange," says Tori when sitting next to me in class.

"Huh?"

"You heard me." He leans over the aisle. "Are you hiding something?"

"Like what?" I play dumb, but I knew this would eventually come to be. I haven't been eating lunch with him, Chelsea and Rose. I've been disappearing most afternoons after class because I'm hanging out with Matt. I've been texting a lot, even now, I have a message from Matt awaiting my reply.

Tori catches me attempting to text beneath my desk. He purses his lips. "You're being awfully suspicious."

"Says you."

"Yeah, says me, and I'm right. You're hiding something!" He pokes me in the nose.

"No I'm not," I lie, but my eyes deceive me. They briefly glance at Matt sitting at the front of the room. His headphones are in, as per usual. He's not as heavily surrounded by people as he was when school first began. Some have realized he isn't interested and wandered off, but some unfortunately remain.

Tori swings his head back and forth. He's not a fool, which sucks because he's nosy and he should have to be a fool and nosy to allow everyone some freedom. He smirks.

"Interesting." He holds up his hands, tapping the tips of his fingers together like a villain. "I do believe that I've put a few pieces of this mystery

together."

"You definitely didn't," I mutter although I'm pretty sure that yeah, he's catching on. Thankfully our professor walks in to save the day, allowing me a break and Tori to, hopefully, forget this topic by the end of class.

Even if he hasn't forgotten, we have different classes afterwards. I escape my far too inquisitive roommate that will have to learn the truth eventually. For now though, I attend classes like usual before meeting Matt at the library. He's waiting patiently at the usual table, bobbing his head slightly to whatever song he's listening to. I pop out one of the headphones causing him to whip his head around in surprise. When he sees me, he smiles.

"Hello stranger," he says.

"Hi." I sit next to him, warming up before he even kisses my cheek. I glance around the library nervously, but as usual there's no one around.

"So, I wanted to ask you something," Matt says out of the blue when I'm midbite into a chicken sandwich. I imagine the sight is quite amusing because he snorts.

"A-About?"

"Nothing to worry over," he reassures me, reaching over to tenderly rub my back. He's almost hesitant to do so until he realizes I'm more than ok with it. I'm fine with affection and I'm even more than fine with Matt being affectionate. Although I get embarrassed by a mere smile, but it's nice to know that he does too. We're both a bunch of blushing fools and that's kind of cool.

"I was asked to do a modeling job," he says. Initially I'm shocked until I remember, right, this isn't odd. Matt's an actor. He has done his fair share of modeling. "He's a good friend of mine so I decided to dip my toes back in, I guess. It's next Tuesday but...well, I was wondering if you'd like to come along?"

Again, I'm caught midbite. Now Matt actually laughs, handing me a napkin since I start to choke on my food. I smack my chest a few times then ask, "W-What?"

"I understand if you don't want to. We'd have to miss class." He shrugs, but I notice the sudden dimming of his eyes. "Thought I'd ask if you'd like to stop on set, see a little behind the scenes of a photoshoot."

It'd be a complete lie if I said I wasn't curious, but it'd also be a complete lie if I said the idea of it doesn't make me nervous. Me? On a photoshoot set? That is unimaginable, nerve wracking!

"Is that really ok?" I ask. "Wouldn't I be in the way?"

Matt shakes his head. "Not at all. You don't have to stay the whole time either. Joey could bring you back."

He's really trying to talk me into it. Although his expression is void, his body language says something else entirely. His hand lingers at the base of my spine, fingers slightly twisted into my shirt as if to pull me closer. Beneath the table, I feel his leg knock mine once or twice due to his shaking. I guess he wouldn't ask me if he didn't actually want me to go...

"O-Ok."

His eyes brighten when he smiles. "Really?"

I nod. "I've never been to a photoshoot so that'd definitely be cool."

And it seems like a really simple way to make Matt happy. Works too because he continues to smile, reaching for my hand to hold warmly in his own.

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How did the day for the photoshoot get here so fast? Feels like yesterday that Matt asked me, and yet, he's here to pick me up early Tuesday morning. I lied again to Tori, claiming I was asked to work so he went to class while I actually got ready to go to a freaking photoshoot set. That hasn't settled in
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yet, even when I'm on my way to Matt's car waiting patiently outside the dorms.

When I slip into the car, I'm a clear nervous wreck. Matt smirks. "No reason to be nervous," he says, already driving off. "You're just a friend visiting while I work. Joey will be there too."

Joey and I don't really talk much seeing as, most of the time, it's just me and Matt. At school we meet at the library and Joey does his own thing. If we're at the apartment then we're alone. Sometimes we try to sneak out so Joey doesn't tag along, otherwise it's obvious. But I guess I do already feel more comfortable at the thought of having someone to go if Matt is busy and, I don't know, I'm panicking.

"I-Is there anything I s-shouldn't do?" I sputter, imagining all the worst case scenarios, like I trip over a wire and break some two thousand dollar camera or I trip into a light set and shatter the bulbs. Maybe I'll get a snack and spill food all over the clothes Matt is meant to wear. I suddenly realized I don't even know what he's modeling for!

"Not really," he answers. "Just look around, have some fun."

"That's e-easier said than done."

Matt takes my hand. He slips his fingers between mine, giving a good squeeze to get my attention. It works. I'm watching his smile that already helps ease the tension away.

"Thanks for coming with me," he says. He turns serious all of a sudden. "Honestly, I asked you to come along because I got nervous."

"Hah?" I tilt my head. "About what?"

He taps the back of my hand with his thumb. "It's been a while and, I don't know, I keep thinking they're going to talk about me, about...what happened."

Ah, the article, his break. That makes sense. Matt has been out of the business for a while, trying to steer clear of the spotlight. Like he said, he's dipping his toes back in. Now I'm really glad I agreed to come along.

It's my turn to reassure him. "I'm sure it'll be fine. They wouldn't have asked for you if they didn't want you...what are you even modeling for anyway?"

"Some winter clothes collection."

"Shouldn't the model know more than just 'some winter clothes collection'?" I tease. He gives a nonchalant shrug in response, grinning along with me afterwards.

The remainder of the ride takes about thirty minutes, which is filled with the soft hums of music. We end up at a wide brick building, industrial-like with a garage that Matt parks in. There are about ten other cars here. Based on the interior, this was probably some kind of warehouse at one point. Now it's been made into a sort of studio area, as I soon discover when we walk out of the garage and into the actual space. Joey is right behind us, giving me a welcoming smile.

In the studio there is another wide open space where I see an area being set up for the photoshoot, lights, cameras, a white background and a good bit of people. There are other rooms scattered throughout the space. One of which has a rather frantic looking woman stepping out. The moment she sees Matt, she beams.

"Matt!" She calls, rushing over on clicking heels. "You know I could have sent your van to come get you?"

"Felt like driving." He shrugs while I'm clinging to the "sent your van" portion. Everyday I'm reminded more and more that he really is of an entirely different world than me. He could have a freaking chauffeur if he wanted!

"This is Dana, the friend I told you I'd bring," he says with a gesture to me. I give a shy wave while the lady grins. "Dana, this is my manager, Jean."

"Nice to meet you, Dana." She takes my hand for an unexpectedly firm shake. Then she's on the move, patting Matt's back. "Come on, let's go say hi to everyone."

Matt's being guided along so I follow quietly behind. At least Joey is by me. We're both quiet, but it's nice to know he's there. Somehow, we both feel a little out of place as Matt socializes. I'm introduced to the photographer, designers, make up artists, the whole shabang. It's crazy how many people are here for a single photoshoot and then the next model arrives. My jaw drops because even I recognize the girl that squeals, "Matt!"

She runs over, attempting to go in for a hug, but Matt legit sidesteps her. I'd laugh, but I'm actually kind of embarrassed because I don't even think Matt did it on purpose. He just stepped away then nodded. "Been a while, Camille."

Pretty sure Camille Hale is one of the faces of Forever Beauty, the brand Matt's mom owns. I've seen her all over magazines and in stores, showing off products from makeup to clothes. I've never known her name until now, but I definitely know the face. She's been in a lot of commercials too and if I recognize her then that means a lot! I don't pay attention to this kind of stuff.

"I was so excited when I heard you agreed to come today," says Camille with a wide smile. She brushes some of the light brown hair from her wide green eyes. "Is this the beginning of your return? Because I'm in need of a new Matthew Jeneviere show or movie to watch."

"Not sure about that." He shrugs, appearing as apathetic as ever. By this point, I'm impressed with how quick he changes in front of others. "We'll see how today goes."

Camille pouts and only now realizes someone else is here. Her gaze drifts to me. I freeze in place. I'm becoming more and more aware of how small I am in comparison to these two. Camille is actually tall, tall and slim with clear skin and innocent features. Then there's Matt, lumbering over the both of us with his signature cool blue gaze. My stomach churns. They feel a thousand miles away.

"Who's this?" Camille asks in reference to me.

"A friend from school," Matt answers. "Dana, this is Camille."

For some reason, the term "friend" hurts more on this occasion. Towards Matt's mom or even his manager I was fine with it, more than fine, but right now the title makes me uncomfortable. Still, I force on a smile.

"Camille, Matt!" Someone calls, garnering both their attention. It's probably the stylist calling them over. Camille gives me a wave before walking off while Matt offers me a smile.

"You can look around some more if you want," he offers.

"Think I'll stick with you," I mumble, already following him. He chuckles, guiding us both to one of the rooms where there are wide mirrors, bright lights and giant make up stations. There are couches to sit on in the room so I take a seat, watching everyone get to work.

If I thought Matt felt far away with Camille then I don't know how to explain what I feel now. Stuff like this I've seen in movies or TV shows, something I can't quite wrap my head around. Matt's sitting in a chair, messing around on his phone, uncaring of the people scurrying around him to get his hair and make up done. When they're ready, he changes into some of the clothes that are form fitted to him. Now he really looks the part, not the abnormally good looking college student but the actor that I've seen on TV and in magazines, someone that exudes confidence that I can't even fathom.

Put him with Camille, two stars where they belong in front of a camera, and now I want to sink into the floor. This life really does suit him, whether I want to admit it or not. Matt's charming in front of a camera. He can put on a wicked smile or a cool, stern gaze. Camille too, smiling sweetly or merely changing her posture to give a more mature feeling. I hate that I think that they look good together but I do.

I can't deny that, in this moment, I'm not so sure I am the right pick for Matt. Doesn't he need someone...more? Someone simply more than me.

~

Aw, Dana, nooooo, don't feel bad! D= Our poor boy...are you surprised he feels this way after going with Matt to the shoot? Will he talk to Matt about it? And what do you guys think about Matt taking this job, is this his return to the showbiz or nah?

22. A Dose of Weird, Coming Right Up!

"So, what did you think of your first photoshoot?" asks Matt on the car ride home.

"It was...a lot more than expected," I answer, thinking of how we were there for a whooping eight hours. I expected two at the most, but there was the time taken for makeup, setting up the scene, the actual shots, changing and even fixing makeup to fit the new outfit. It was crazy!

I try not to think of Camille; the sight of the two of them in front of the camera. They looked good together--

Didn't I say I'm not going to think about it?

"That's it?" Matt asks, glancing at me out of his peripheral. He's hard to look at. With his hair still styled, and the images of earlier stuck in my head, he's somehow even more attractive than usual. That's unfair.

"What else is there to say?" I tease, sensing that he wants me to bring up something specific. I'm not sure what, but his pout states my assumptions to be true.

"What did you think of the models at the photoshoot?"

I snort. "Are you asking what I thought of you?"

"Not me in particular, but in general."

There was only him and Camille so I take this opportunity to tease him more; "Camille's really pretty. She knows how to work a camera."

His shoulders slump.

"But I prefer the male model more," I add, twiddling my thumbs in my lap. "He was cool."

"Cool?" Matt hums.

"And a tiny bit handsome."

"A tiny bit," he chuckles, suddenly reaching over to take my hand. My entire body heats up from the mere intertwining of our fingers. I relish in this feeling, trying to ignore the self hatred from earlier. It seems like Matt had fun today. I don't want to ruin his mood, but most importantly, I don't want to face my own somber thoughts.

"What about you?" I inquire. "Was today ok? Better than you expected?"

Matt hesitates, eyes dim for a moment until he suddenly smiles. I can sense his relief on the air, hear it in his voice when he responds, "Yeah, much better than expected."

"Are you going to start up more work then?"

He tilts his head from side to side, thinking my question over. In the end, he groans, "I don't know. Would be tough with school."

I nod.

"But today made me realize how much I actually missed it," he whispers. The smile he wears is somewhere between melancholic and joyous, which is an odd thought. "I thought it'd be tedious or bring up only bad memories, but it didn't."

"That's good, right?"

"Guess so."

I wish I could be simply happy for Matt, but there's a shadow of a thought in the back of my mind. The fear grows. What will happen should Matt return to the spotlight? What will happen to our relationship? There will be requests for photoshoots, drama's, movies, endless possibilities that I doubt

I can begin to comprehend. Our time will lessen, and while that often happens with couples, it's safe to say ours will be an extreme. There will be eyes on him, interest, and constant reminders that Matt can have so much more than me.

Being scared is hard. Somehow, telling someone you're scared is even worse.

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Christmas break is fast approaching. The once cool autumn weather has morphed into blistering winter winds. With that wind comes the first snowfall. I wish I was with Matt to see it. Unfortunately, I'm a few minutes away from getting off from an extra shift at work in the middle of the week. Matt is in class so I have to walk back. Not as many students are walking about now that it's so cold, which means we're pretty dead. Normally I'd be ok with that, now this feels like a waste. Matt and I could be together, skip class to watch the snow or something.

"Wow, it's snowing!" says Becky, having stepped out of the bathroom after cleaning it. She rushes over to the windows, peeking out into the gray sky. "A bit early this year, isn't it? Normally we don't see snow until December!"

"Yeah, hopefully the roads don't get too bad around break, otherwise we'll all be heading home on ice covered roads."

Becky shivers. "Don't jinx us!"

I'm already clocked and stepping out of the back room when Becky suddenly gapes, pressing her face against the glass. "Oh my god, oh my god!"

"What?" I hum.

"Is that who I think it is?" She gasps, scurrying away from the window. She grabs the mop and bucket where she left it by the open bathroom door to drag around back. Martha curiously watches from the back room.
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"That's Marceline Jeneviere, Matt's mom!" Becky exclaims, rushing up front so that she's at the counter. Martha doesn't seem to know what we're talking about because she just shrugs Becky's exclamation off while I'm in shock.

"What?"

"She's right outside the shop!" Becky points. "I don't know if she's coming in, I mean, she's probably not, right?"

I hope not!

I risk heading over to the window to peak. Sure enough, there's Marceline. I barely have time to back up before the door swings open with a quiet "ding." My blood runs cold. A cool wind rushes through the shop. I'm uncertain if it's from the outside or Marceline's very presence.

She's as foreboding as ever, towering over me in high heels. A man in a form fitting suit walks with her, a secretary I'm guessing, or possibly a bodyguard. Maybe even both? Either way, they're strange to see. What is she doing here, in our dead Subway shop?

"Dana," she calls with a warm smile that may fool me if I hadn't already seen how Matt reacts to the mere mention of her.

"H-Hello," I squeak, watching Marceline. She feels like a hawk, waiting for the right time to devour me.

"Please don't be so nervous around me," she giggles. "We almost missed each other."

I wish we had missed each other.

Marceline gestures outside. "I was visiting a friend next door when I happened to see you through the window. Are you getting off your shift?"

A friend next door? Ah, I guess that makes sense. There's a brand name jewelry shop next door. Still, us running into each other is unsettling.

"Uh, yeah, I'm about to walk back to campus," I answer.

"Walk? It's far too cold for that. Come along, I'll give you a ride."

My insides are saying no, but I can't think of anything to say. In the end, I give a slow nod and nervously follow her out the door. The car is even more luxurious than Matt's. Marceline even has a chauffeur, the guy with her that slides into the driver's side while we take the back. I feel like garbage in here, probably smell like it too, but Marceline makes no mention of it.

"I'm glad we ran into each other," she says. "When I saw Matt brought someone over, I admit I became rather intrigued. He's a very private person."

Understandably so.

"How did you two meet, if you don't mind my asking?"

I do mind, but I don't have much choice in this situation so I nervously answer, "I a-accidentally spilled food on him i-in the cafeteria."

She raises a thin eyebrow.

"W-We just kept talking from there."

"Hmm, you must be close to have visited his apartment. Are you also in the same major?"

"Uh, no, I'm an English major."

Maybe I should have lied. That leads to the question of how and why we continued speaking, but Marceline makes no mention of that either. She even sits elegantly in the car, one leg over the other and hands placed atop one another in her lap. The aura around them is a family thing too. Matt feels a thousand miles away sometimes. Marceline feels like she's in another freaking galaxy.

She brushes a strand of dark black hair behind her ear, moving onto the next question, "I heard you went with him to a photoshoot."

I nod.

"Quite a spectacle, aren't they? I remember going to my first, very overwhelming." She smiles at me.

"Ah, yeah, it-it was a lot different than expected." My fingers twist into the fabric of my pants. "But he seemed like he enjoyed it."

"Good. I hope he agrees to start preparing to film over Christmas break."

"H-Huh?" I squeak.

"Ah, the papers I brought him the other day. One of the jobs was a drama that they're hoping to start preparations for filming over break. I think the job would suit him." She pats my shoulder just as the car comes to a stop. "He's brilliant in front of a camera, isn't he?"

So much so it's almost unbelievable.

"He should return to where he belongs," she says that like it's no big deal, but it feels like a stab in the gut.

The door opens. Cold air attacks my exposed skin.

"It was nice seeing you again, Dana," she says. "We still have to have our dinner sometime too."

"Yeah," I whisper with a slow nod. "Thanks...for the ride."

Marceline nods. I step out of the car, my mind completely numb as I watch it drive off. What was that all about? Although she claims that we only ran into each other, that felt like a not so friendly interrogation. Why though? Is she worried about Matt? Their relationship continues to baffle me as more time passes.

I don't even have the time to consider anything more before a familiar voice calls out, "Dana!"

Turning, I notice Matt jogging down the sidewalk. There's something off about him, further proven by the tight grip he has around my wrist in an instant. I yelp in surprise, stumbling over my feet as he drags me to the sitting area in front of the dorm. Students are returning, some watching us as they pass, which has me trying to squirm out of his grasp.

"What are you doing?" I ask, finally wrenching myself free. His narrow eyes send a chill down my spine.

He cuts right to the chase; "Were you just with my mom?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah. She showed up at work and offered me a ride," I explain, but I swear the words aren't quite reaching his mind. Matt's unusually jittery. There's a strange tension, back completely rigid as if his spine has been glued straight.

"Are you ok?" I whisper. The person in front of me is unfamiliar. This isn't Matt, this is a shell of him. A shivering boy that has nothing to do with the frigid air and everything to do with whatever's eating away at his mind.

The question is ignored, replaced with a rushed one of his own; "What the hell were you talking about?"

He's acting really weird. This whole day has turned out weird.

I sputter out a response, "Um, s-she asked how we knew each other and, uh, if we were in the same major. Then she mentioned something about preparing to film over break. Are you actually going to fi--"

"Is that all?" He interrupts. His eyes rapidly search my own. I'm not sure what. He's borderline frantic, uncaring of those passing by.

"Matt, shouldn't you keep your voice down?" I whisper, but my own requests aren't reaching him.

He ruffles his hair almost violently. I fear he may actually tear some out when he asks, "What else did she say?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me." He sounds like he's begging. He sounds like he actually thinks I'm lying. That hurts, the sensation of not being trusted is far more painful than one can imagine.

I shake my head. "I'm not, that's what we talked about. What's up with you?"

I'm concerned, unbelievably concerned. Why is he acting so weird? Why is he so frantic? Suddenly biting his bottom lip until I fear it may bleed. His eyes darken. Dare I say it, he looks scared when he breathes out, "What did she give you?"

"Huh?"

"She offered you something, didn't she?" He takes my hand. He's shaking. "If she did, I-I won't be mad, I promise. Just tell me. Just be honest, Dana."

He's confusing me even more. I can't think straight as my hands start to sweat.

"I am being honest," I mumble, wishing I could instead shout it from the rooftops or somehow enforce the truth into my words so he can actually hear.

His grip tightens. There's a moment of hesitation before he sighs, "Then show me your phone."

I'm so shocked that I'm not sure what kind of noise I make. It comes out as some form of weird squeak.

"Show me your phone," he repeats and maybe, under different circumstances, I would have without question. There's nothing on there to hide, but it's the fact that he's demanding this of me while assuming I've done something wrong that manages to set me off.

"No." I tear my hand away from him, rearing back. He steps away, either realizing how he's acting or scared that whatever he's thinking is true. Either way, I'm uncomfortable, worried and confused.

"I'm not someone you can order around as you please," I hiss. "I don't know what the hell is up with you and your mom, but I told you what happened and you're...you're seriously freaking me out!"

Matt stiffens, eyes wide and jaw set firm. He averts his gaze, flushing up to his ears. From embarrassment or anger, I don't know, but he lowers his head in shame.

"I'm going inside and...and when you decide to tell me what the hell this was about then we can talk," I mutter, not even sure if he heard me or not.

Matt says nothing, shaking in place as I walk away.

~

Oh buddy. Oh boy. Oh wow, that was quite a chapter, wasn't it? Dana is being thrown into all kinds of weird situations. What was Marceline doing speaking with him? Why is Matt acting so strange after seeing them? Will he and Dana be able to reconcile after this?!

23. Breakups Make Us Poets

My first real relationship and our first fight. So this is what that feels like.

Cold water in my lungs, weighing me down. A strange sense of calm, confusion and frustration mixed into one. An endless typhoon tugging at the strings of my consciousness until the fear of being torn to shred forces me to relieve the tension. Study. Do homework. Play video games. Watch TV. Do something, anything to bury the memories, but I always end up back in bed, curled beneath the blankets like they'll somehow spare me.

Matt's frantic expression. The color simmering under his cheeks. Nerves evident in every minuscule twitch. The rough sound of his pleading voice. I don't want to think about it because I'm scared to know why he reacted so strangely. I'm scared to know what happens next.

Apologies are more complicated than *I'm sorry's* and *it won't happen again* . There has to be intent and honesty behind those words or they mean less than that of a stranger's. I don't know if I'm meant to say them or he is. Was I wrong to storm off like that? Should I have tried to pry the truth out of him in hopes to keep away this sudden tension?

I don't know. I'm lost in an unfamiliar place.

My phone rests on the bedside table. Only seconds pass between my glances. Waiting for a text or a call or some sign from Matt that he wants to make up, that he wants to talk. But then there's hope that he doesn't. Lingering worry and fear festering like an infection in an open wound. What am I meant to say? What do I ask and what do I expect from him?

I don't know.

The door swings open. Tori enters, yawning so wide that his cheeks threaten to snap. When spotting me, he freezes, wide-eyed.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Huh?" I sit up, removing my fogged up glasses to clean with the end of my shirt. "N-Nothing, why?"

Tori puts a hand on his hip. "Something's wrong. It's written all over your face."

I put my glasses back on, tilting my head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Tori sits at the edge of my bed, lips pursed and arms crossed. He examines me like a scientist in a lab with a new specimen that he plans to rip to shreds. Only I'm not torn apart for his viewing pleasure, instead, he sighs.

"Don't keep your problems bottled up," he orders. "Whatever's going on, at least talk to someone or you'll lose it." He smacks my leg. "I'm gonna hit the shower. There are tissues in my bedside drawer if you need 'em."

"What do you usually use those tissues for?" I call after him with a teasing grin that slips at his immediate response.

"Masturbating, obviously." He disappears into the bathroom with a chuckle.

I don't realize how calm Tori made me until he's gone. I didn't even notice that I was more relaxed with him here. Suppose that's how life works, you don't realize what you have until it's gone. Wow, I'm getting really mopey.

Tori's right though. I should talk to someone. I have no idea what I'm doing and, well, it's about time he knows what's going on. So I wait. I wait curled up on the bed staring at my phone in a weird tug of war with my feelings. Do I want him to call or not? Do I want to call him or not?

Tori emerges, ruffling his thick hair roughly with a towel that is thrown back into the bathroom. He slips on a hoodie, hair a complete mess that he attempts to tame until he spots me staring at him.

"What?" He asks, smacking his own face. "Is there something on my face?"

I shake my head.

"What's up then?" He throws himself into bed, kicking his feet under the covers when reaching for the remote.

TV is forgotten about though when I blurt out, "Matt and I are dating."

Under different circumstances, I imagine he'd be jumping into my bed screaming for details. Tori is much smarter than most probably give him credit for though. He can put two and two together; my strange demeanor and suddenly blurting this out. He's quick on the uptake.

"Did you two fight?" he asks, laying on his side so he's facing me.

I nod.

"Do you wanna talk about it?"

Another nod.

"Give me the deets," he says with a comforting smile. I'm slightly surprised he's so relaxed and feeling a little guilty I didn't say anything sooner.

"I don't want to say too much since it's personal for him," I mumble under my breath. "But, uh, I ran into his mom today and that really upset him. He was acting super strange, asking to see my phone and just...getting really intense with me, but wouldn't tell me why, so I...I told him that we can talk when he explains what's going on and stormed off."

That's not a lot of information so it's no wonder that Tori's brows are furrowed in clear confusion.

"Ok," he drags out the 'o' so that his own mouth mimics the letter. "So there's something negative between him and his mom that led to him acting out. You reacted understandably though. I wouldn't like anyone demanding to see my phone without good reason, feels like an invasion of privacy."

"Y-You think so? I wasn't...too harsh or anything?"

"Hell no. Sounds like he made you uncomfortable. You had every right to get yourself out of the situation, but that's not the whole issue, is it?" he

inquires, frowning at my slow nod.

"I don't know what to do now. Do I call? Do I wait for him to call? Do I accept an apology and no answer or what?"

"Wait for a call. Don't accept an apology without an answer," Tori states like it's a law rather than a suggestion. I almost feel like he should have a gavel to slam down. "He needs to tell you what's wrong so this doesn't happen again and you shouldn't have to force it out of him. He needs to willingly talk or that can breed resentment."

He suddenly taps his chin, averting his gaze. "Ah, well, there are all kinds of ways to build resentment in," His eyes widen when meeting my own now terrified gaze. He sheepishly smiles. "In any case! You should wait until he calls."

"What if he doesn't?" I ask, worrying over my bottom lip.

Tori sighs. Picking at the strings of his hoodie, he answers, "I wish I had all the answers, but I don't. Should that happen, it's up to you if you want to go to him."

I'm terrible at making decisions though.

"Either way, congratulations!" He claps thunderously, shocking me enough to jump. "Look at you, bedding yourself an actor!"

"B-B-Bedding?!"

"Haven't gotten that far yet?" He smirks, reaching in the drawer. My face is on the verge of melting off when Tori tosses me a string of condoms. "You're welcome in advance!"

I regret telling him.

~~~~~~

Matt doesn't call. He doesn't text. We don't meet up for lunch. He doesn't show up to class on Thursday. Work rolls around Friday morning; work that
~~~~~~

I pay little attention to. Customers attempt conversation only to receive half assed nods or hums, even more so than usual. My thoughts linger elsewhere, on a certain movie loving boy that I miss more and more with every passing second.

Is he really not going to call? Are we not going to talk?

My sighs are many, sprinkled throughout the day. We're not meant to be on our phones at work. I rarely checked mine before, seeing as I had no reason to. Now is different though. Now I risk checking my phone over and over again in hopes for any sign of Matt. But there's nothing. There's nothing all throughout the work day until I'm dragging my feet out of the backroom to head back to the dorm.

The autumn air is cold. A slight breeze easily tears through my thin jacket. I should have brought a heavier one, but I hate having the scent of backroom Subway on my clothes. So my clothes are thrown in the dirty laundry hamper as soon as I return to the dorm. Tori is out doing who knows what, leaving me alone with my thoughts in a steaming hot shower.

Who knew that the absence of a single person could zap the color from everyday. A once colored picture now turned sad gray.

Oh no, mopey Dana has returned, but that lasts all of a second until I'm out of the shower and checking my phone again. My eyes widen.

Matt: *Are you home?*

Me: *Yeah*

Matt: *Can we talk?*

The phone shakes, proving that my hands are doing the same. "Can we talk," is almost as frightening as, "we need to talk." What does he have to say? What do I want to say?

Me: *I'd like to, yeah*

Matt: *I'm already at the dorms. Is Tori there?*

Me: *No, but probably best we not talk here in case he shows up*

Matt: *You ok to come back to my place?*

Me: *Yeah, I'll be down in a sec*

I swiftly change, fumbling over my own shoes at the door. I nearly faceplant when bolting out into the hall. A student passes by, eyebrows raised at the dumb ass scurrying in the hall. The elevator is too slow, blinking at the bottom floor so I take the stairs two at a time. My glasses fall off, clinking against the floor. They're not broken though!

It isn't until I spot Matt's car that the truth sinks in; this may not go well.

My stomach curdles like spoiled milk. Sickness rises, threatens to spill over. I take hesitant steps to the passenger side, my fingers splayed against the door handle. Then I slide in, slowly facing Matt. He wears a ball cap, head down, shielding his eyes. They're not focused on me though, rather his lap as his knuckles whiten on the wheel.

"Hey," he whispers.

"Hi."

"I'm sorry about the other day. I shouldn't have treated you like that."

The apology is unexpected, at least not this early. I was certainly hoping for one, but hearing the regret in his voice is actually painful. After not seeing him for a few days, I don't want this. I want a smile and a laugh and to hear his warm voice.

"It's ok." I shrug then purse my lips. "Ah, I mean, n-not ok for you to treat me like that, but, like, it's ok that-that you've apologized. Or, I mean, I accept your apology?"

Matt chuckles, the warmth I've been yearning for. He looks at me, sad baby blues brightening for a brief moment. A moment that nearly burns when he says, "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

He smiles, but that smile falls. "You shouldn't forgive so easily though. You don't even know why I--" He rubs the back of his neck. "--why I acted like that."

"But you're going to tell me, right? That's why you're here."

He nods, revving up the engine so that he can pull away from the dorms. Matt wears a shadowed expression, even his cool blue eyes seem to fade to dull gray.

I'm not sure I can even imagine what he's going to say...

~

Tori knows the truth and gave advice! Our boys are talking! They're somehow still adorable even during the tension ^^ What does Matt have to say? Any guesses to his past?

24. A Whole Other Level of Overbearing

Matt's apartment is quiet, save for the soft rummaging in the kitchen. He gets us drinks, like I'm some sort of royal guest that he has to serve. Even going so far as to placing the cup in front of me with a tray of snacks. He's stalling. Understandable considering his reactions. Shaking. Eyes whipping this way and that. Scratching at the top of his thumb nail until he accidentally tears the flesh below.

I grab his hand before he can walk away, before he can do more damage. He eases into the couch, hand cold and clammy in mine. I don't know if he's ready to talk. I don't think it's right to force him, but I don't want what happened to be a recurring incident either.

"Are you ok?" I smooth over his hand, interlocking our fingers. "If this is bothering you too much--"

"It's not that," he interrupts. "I don't want to scare you off."

That's worrying to hear. What Matt has kept to himself must be more than what most believe. That's usually the case with everyone. There's always more to the story because only those directly involved know the full truth. Whatever Matt's truth is has managed to shatter the typically blunt actor.

I hope to help him along by asking, "Does this have to do with what you said before, how Marceline is controlling?"

The mention of her name is enough to invoke a reaction, a flinch and tense jaw.

"It all began with that," he whispers, taking his hand from mine. A chill invades from his absence, but he leans away, buried into the corner of the couch like a cowering child. When next he speaks, his eyes harden to ice.

"The girls don't remember Dad, not like I do, and they don't remember the fights. It wasn't just us Marceline tried to control, but him too. Dad had enough, walked out on us to never be heard from again. You think she'd catch the hint, see what happens when you push someone too far, but without him around she just found another victim."

Matt, the one she already had her claws into based on what he has already mentioned thus far. He was a child actor, possibly even before his Dad left. I'd ask, but Matt continues on, gaze distant. A thousand miles away.

"She determined everything; what I ate, when I ate, what I played, when I played, what I wore, where the clothes were from, how I talked and even who I hung out with. Every detail of my life was measured to better hers. The food and the clothes and the friends, all were somehow business connections or another way to make her look good. It got to the point where, if she wasn't around, I didn't even know what to do. I'd sit and stare, unclear of what I was meant to do because I rarely had any choice myself."

Violence has never been on the forefront of my mind, but I would very much like to punch Marceline in the face, or preferably much worse. Controlling was an understatement. She was brainwashing him, turning a child into a machine to work for her benefit. How any of her children managed to escape her grasp is beyond me. A miracle if I've ever heard of one.

I'm surprised Matt has chosen to start so far back. Surprised, but grateful. To understand his tale, to understand anyone's, it's best to start at the beginning.

Matt's voice shutters when he says, "It was like I was a bird in a cage, my wings clipped so I'd never soar. She wanted it that way, for me to cling to her, and it worked...for a while."

He grows quiet, cheeks flushed. From rage or embarrassment, maybe both, I'm not sure.

"What changed?" I ask, guiding him along.

"I met someone," he answers, arms crossed. Trembling fingers grip his arms, nails nearly piercing the skin. "Andrew Miath, son of the CEO of MiaCon."

MaiCon? Why does that name sound familiar?

"MiaCon was a chemical manufacturing company that had some big ties with Forever Beauty."

Right, Rose and Chelsea mentioned them when that article about Matt came out! Something about MiaCon's shady business dealings being busted during the drug raid.

Matt continues on, telling me the tale that I've only heard rumors about; "Soon I heard that Andy would be transferring to our school. I suspected we were to make friends, but Mom told me the opposite. Steer clear. That was hard to do, seeing as we were in the same grade and shared classes."

Matt snickers, a warm memory overtaking the gray for a moment. His eyes brighten, but he wears a sad smile. "We were 16 and I was obsessed with him, although I'm still not sure if it's because I liked him or I liked what he gave me; freedom."

He liked him. My heart aches, although I know it shouldn't. The two don't seem to be in contact anymore.

"Andy was rebellious and contagious. I'm not sure what it was, maybe I had enough and saw an opening and took it, but I finally broke. I followed him. I broke the rules. Simple at first, skipping class, borrowing a cigarette, bribing someone to buy me alcohol, but it escalated. I was drinking a lot. He snuck me out of the house at night to go to parties. We did so much, as if I was living my whole life in that moment. Suddenly Mom's threats and cruel words meant nothing to me. I'd scream and spit in her face after coming home in a drunken stupor. I'd pawn off her priceless jewelry for quick cash or smash in the TV's, even the windshield of her car once."

Under different circumstances, maybe I'd laugh. Maybe I'd find it humorous for Marceline to get what she deserves, but not for the price of Matt. The

way he speaks of this is no way amused or even proud, he's sad and angry and embarrassed. Curled in on himself on the couch, ashamed of how out of control he was, although I don't blame him. He was starved of freedom his whole life that, when it was finally offered to him, he drowned himself in it.

Matt rests an elbow on the arm of the couch. He ruffles his hair, runs his hand down his face, around the back of his neck. His voice now mirrors his eyes, somehow distant but near.

"Then, one night, Andy invited me to another party at his place. I was meant to be on a plane heading for a photoshoot in the Bahamas, but Andy was insistent and, well, I took any chance to piss my Mom off so I went. It wasn't anything different than usual. Lights. Drinks. Drugs, although I never partook, but--" Matt shields his eyes, muttering the next part of the story. "Andy's dad was planning to cut him off. He lived a very luxurious lifestyle, we all did, so he wasn't very fond of the idea of being broke. He knew I didn't have access to my money, Marceline had full control and only gave me an allowance. He did know that she didn't like bad publicity though so...he spiked my drink."

My heart drops into my stomach. Images of a night only explained to me flashes in my mind. I want to cry for him. Maybe I already am. Matt doesn't give me time to react.

"I don't remember much. Just being in a room with him. A camera. Then shouting. Noise. Chaos. An ambulance. Everything was a blur until I woke up in the hospital, interrogated by cops mere minutes later. MiaCon was already under investigation, the party was a perfect way to rush in and get what they could. Unfortunately, my dumb ass was there, being used by someone again." Matt nearly bites through his bottom lip, the sorrow turning to frustration.

"After what Andy did, after everything that was being said about me, I didn't have much fight left. Mom didn't put me back in a cage. She made it a cell. For almost two years I didn't even leave the house. She had cameras installed everywhere, bodyguards that didn't let me leave the premises. Everything I did was monitored and every person I spoke with had to be taken through her. My life was an open book for her to read. I had changed

though, maybe not for the best at first, but in the long run. I wanted to go back to school, to move out and be on my own so I basically told her to fuck off since I had control of my finances by then--" Matt gestures around us, finishing his tale with a quiet sigh. "Now here I am."

Now here I am, he says that as if this isn't an accomplishment. Had I been in his shoes, I don't think I would have ever made it this far. How strong someone has to be in order to break out of such an abusive relationship, two of them in fact. I don't know what happened to Andy, but I hope he never comes near Matt again. He doesn't deserve him.

"I know that I shouldn't have treated you like that the other day," Matt adds, head lowered in shame. "And I know that...that this doesn't make what I did ok either. I don't expect it to, but I at least wanted you to know why I freaked out like that. She terrifies me, Dana, what she can do and what she's willing to do to her own family. Even when I know it doesn't make sense, even when I know you're not the type of person to hurt me like they have, I can't stop thinking about it. I panic. I--"

My arms wrap around his trembling shoulders that he may not even be aware are shaking so badly. Muscles tense. A brief moment where only I cling to him until he reacts. Burying his face into the crook of my neck. Arms slithering around my waist, holding tight and close and warm. He sighs, relief etched into more than the sound, but also the very muscles relaxing beneath my hands.

"I understand," I say to him, sniffling. The tears may be from sorrow or frustration after the story he's weaved. "Rather, I can't understand what that was like, but I can respect why you worry. I would too, actually, I don't think I'd have been as strong as you."

"Strong." He snorts. "Were you even listening?"

"I was."

"Then how could you say that?"

"Because it's true." I run my fingers through his hair then pull away, peering up into sad blue eyes. "No one should have treated you like that, especially a mother. She should be in prison, at the very least."

He chuckles.

"I hate her. And I hate how she treated you. And I hate how no one bothers to know the whole story. And I hate that you don't see how far you've come. You're incredible, Matt."

His face flushes vibrant red. Eyes averting to the floor. Clearing his throat, he says, "That's an exaggeration."

"It's not. I wish I was better with words because that doesn't quite explain you either." I lean in, surprising him with a swift kiss. He blinks rapidly, still red as flames. I take his hands in mine, holding them firmly in my lap. "Thanks for telling me. I know it must have been hard."

He nods, running his thumbs over the back of my hands. "We probably would have been over if I hadn't."

My heart skips. Matt working up the courage to tell me this because he's as smitten as I am builds a new sort of confidence that I wish I would have had back at the photoshoot. Although I can't lie and say that I'm still not a little bothered, this moment has helped me out of the slump I was in.

"Thanks for believing me," he adds, leaning in to rest his head on my shoulder. I flush when he pulls me close, holding me like a teddy bear.

Now that settles in; the fact that no one listened. Matt went through trauma not once, but throughout his entire life. He was accused of something he didn't do, of something that was forced upon him, that could have gone much, much worse. He has to live with that. Maybe one day he can tell his tale and others will listen, but he needs people to listen now. I'm only one person. I hope that's enough.

"Can you stay tonight?"

There's no way he doesn't feel how tense I am, or hear my heart banging against my ribs. He makes no mention of it though, doesn't smirk or tease. The question isn't so much a question but a request, a plea. He's shaking, upset and doesn't want to be alone.

"I can sleep on the couch," he says in an attempt to convince me, not that I need it. I'll stay, but I need to get the answer out of my suddenly dry mouth. Not that I'm expecting anything! But, well, staying the night is just...damn it, maybe I'm expecting a little, but it's not going to happen! Matt is upset, stop it, Dana, get it together!

"I-I can...stay," I finally answer, flushing when his lips press a lingering kiss against my neck.

"Thanks." His word is whispered against my warm skin.

That night I'm given spare clothes to sleep over and we stay up watching Matt's beloved movies where he is more cuddly than usual. He rests with his head in my lap, sometimes rolling over to hug my abdomen while he snuggles. I play with his hair when he leans up to kiss me or he holds both my hands merely because. Affection laced in sugar, so sweet one may grow sick. Not me though. I hope for more, smiling when he kisses me or laughing when he flops on the couch with more snacks, wiggling over to me like a worm to retake his position on my lap.

I want to give him all the affection he should have had, all the affection that he deserves. Does that make me greedy, or maybe too proud?

The evening grows late. Matt yawns, so do I. He sits up, checking his phone that states it's well past 4 in the morning. Neither of us are going to class tomorrow, it seems.

"You can head up to bed, if you want," he says, standing. "I'll just grab a pillow and blanket to come down here."

"Y-You don't need to," I blurt out, keeping my eyes ahead. My arms are pin straight, legs not much better as I walk around Matt, who has to me staring at me like I'm crazy. "W-We can s-share the bed."

I wish I said that with more confidence.

"Are you sure?" He snickers. "You seem nervous."

Really? What gave that away? The stuttering or the fact that I'm moving like a robot up the stairs!

"D-Do whatever you w-want," I sputter, finally reaching the top of the loft.

Matt's comforter is a deep green in color with lighter shaded patterned squares. The sheets are a dark gray, but that's all I see since I bury myself beneath them in embarrassment. Matt's scent overwhelms me, even more so when the mattress dips and his warmth invades the blanket. He smiles into the back of my neck, planting another kiss when whispering, "Goodnight, Dana."

I'm relieved that he only wraps his arms around me, holding me close as he drifts to sleep. Even if, yeah, I'd like to take the next step, I don't want to now. Not when Matt's upset, when the need for affection has more to do with sorrow than desire.

I'm content like this, sleeping in Matt's arms, knowing that our fight is over and tomorrow won't be another gray day.

~

Wowza, Matt told his hold story! What do you think about his past concerning both Marceline and Andy? Can Dana maintain the relationship with Matt when someone like Marceline is breathing down their necks? And how damn adorable are these two?! THEY'RE SO CUTE, I CAN'T STAND IT!

25. Dramarama

I take that back. Tomorrow is another gray day.

Matt is shouting angrily on the phone, to who? Haven't a clue. I didn't know he could sound this angry. I'm learning something new about him everyday, although I admit I could have gone my whole life without seeing him go red faced from rage.

Tori sent me a text this morning telling me to stay away from the dorms, there's reporters all over the place, and not to panic. How the hell am I not meant to panic when the internet has basically exploded with the news that Matthew Jeneviere is dating some red-headed dork that spilled food on him months ago?!

Yep, some reporter has been tailing us like a total creep and has managed to snap enough pictures to at least imply what's going. Articles are popping up bit by bit. Drama videos are already being made. Bitch, we're trending on multiple platforms and the majority of it is horrendous.

I scroll through the evidence, wincing all the while. Matt could easily say we're just friends, it's not like we're kissing or anything in the pictures, but people know better. He's walking around with me everywhere. We're secretly eating lunch together in the school library. He's bringing me to his apartment, picking me up at work, things that he doesn't do for others. It's pretty incriminating.

Eventually, Matt meanders his way back to bed, slightly let flushed but equally as frustrated as I am. Frustrated and concerned because, as much as I tell myself not to, I can't help but to read the comments.

He's only dating him for his money.

Matt can do better.

Wow, so even actors can be desperate.

If that loser can date someone like Matt, I can land myself a rich hottie too!

Comments essentially along the lines of Matt is way out of my league and people ragging on me about being a gold digger, one after the other. There are a few of congratulations, people giving their good wishes, hoping that Matt has found his special someone, but they pale in comparison to the insults. Insults that I've worried about, that dig into my already practically non-existent ego.

"Don't read that." Matt gently takes my phone, setting it aside. "It's just a bunch of garbage."

"Yeah, I know."

"Dana." Matt takes my hand, slipping his fingers between mine. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"All this."

"All this being?"

"You know what," he sighs, lowering his head. "It's always just drama with me, whether it's with my mom or people at school or reporters."

"That's not your fault. People are just being nosy and mean because they have nothing better to do with their lives." I wish that made me feel better though. I can't deny that it hurts. Strangers on the internet can hide behind a mask and say the most horrendous things while continuing to let others believe they're good people.

"What do you want to do?" he asks.

"What can we do?"

"I can respond. I can accept another job. They'll ask me about this and I can say that it's a misunderstanding, that we're just friends."

He's giving me a way out. I hate that he has to think about it, that he has to offer. I've thought this a few times and I'm thinking it again; this isn't fair. But I don't know if I'm brave enough to stand against whatever may be thrown at me.

"We have the weekend to think about it," he says, dragging me back onto bed. I happily allow him to bury us beneath the covers. Like this, I can pretend it's just us and nobody knows and we're perfectly normal and ok.

"Whatever you want to do," he whispers, pressing a kiss to the nape of my neck.

"That's not right though," I mumble, feeling him rustle behind me. "We should decide together, what we both want to do."

"I'm used to this though. You're not."

"Being used to it doesn't mean it hurts any less." I know this now more than ever. After what Matt told me, although he has grown up in the spotlight, he still gets nervous, still gets hurt, still doesn't know what to say or how to react to certain situations. He doesn't try arguing against me either.

"If you say we're only friends, will that make people any less suspicious?" I ask, both him and myself. I wrap my hands around his arms, feeling the goosebumps on his skin, same as mine. "Reporters will probably watch you like a hawk for a while so, if we lie, then we'll have to keep up the lie. Maybe we won't be able to see each other for a while or maybe we'll get annoyed with all the hiding. I...I don't want that."

He sighs, warm breath fanning over my neck. Then he holds me closer, twisting his legs up with mine until I'm unsure where I end and he begins. "Me neither," he says.

I want to be brave. I want to be different from the Dana of high school. I want to stand up for myself, and for Matt. I don't know if I can. Arguments, confidence, all that is out of my comfort zone. I've never been the type to stand up for what I believe in because I've never felt like I had the words, the right or even the power to do so. Let others do it while I give my

support from the sidelines because I could never be a headliner, could never lead the charge. I don't know if I can do that now either, but I have to try, right? If I don't then this won't work and I want this to work. I want this to work so badly that it hurts.

"What do you want to do?" I ask.

He hesitates to answer, inevitably doing so as a barely audible whisper, "I don't want to lie."

"W-We don't lie then," I mutter, wishing my breaths weren't so shaky, wishing Matt couldn't sense the obvious discomfort and fear.

He kisses me again and again, but thankfully says, "We don't lie."

~~~~~~

Matt's mom called. She probably said a sentence before Matt hung up on her. She's not pleased with the news, probably frustrated that Matt is dating a nobody, that he's in another scandal even if it's not really what I would define as scandalous. Good thing he changed the locks, otherwise she may have come waltzing in at some point over the weekend.

I had to call off my weekend shifts at work. Thankfully, everyone totally understood. I'm not sure what I'm going to do about next week though.

The rush of news ends up reaching the last people I wanted to find out; my parents. Bridget gives me a warning that Mom may be calling soon crying because, unfortunately, she has read some comments, seen some videos. Understandably, she is upset, so I am not surprised that she calls, although I'm surprised she waits until Sunday afternoon.

"What's going on, Dana?" she asks. I hear the worry in her voice. "I...I've been getting messages on facebook and seeing all this stuff about you dating this Matthew Jen...Jen-uh-vire?"

At least that makes me laugh.
~~~~~~

"Jen-ah-veer," I correct her, peering at Matt pretending to be busy in the kitchen. Please, he's making tea and has been standing there stirring the jug for, like, a minute.

"It's true then, you're dating him?"

I bite my lip, soothing the irritated skin with my tongue when answering, "Yeah, w-we're dating."

My family has never had any issue with my sexuality. I'm certainly not worried about that. Mom doesn't even bring it up anyway. When she sighs, I can take a guess as to why then feel awful when she sniffles, "You're...you're not looking online or anything, are you?"

"I saw a bit."

She sniffles more. "People are saying truly horrible things. Sweetie, this...this is a lot of attention. A-Are you ok? There's, I mean, I don't want to frighten you, but I think we need to be worried. There's threats and bigotry and ignorance and I-I-I don't want to tell you how to live your life, but this is--" She takes a deep breath, releasing a heavy sigh after. "This is a lot."

That's a bit of an understatement, actually. I'm well aware of what is being said and what has been said. Even when all I did was spill some clothes on him there was some insanely rude comments. That's all they were though, all they are, comments. This feels a bit different though, a bit more charged and, possibly, more likely that something may actually happen. What? Haven't a clue. Maybe someone will actually approach me or maybe someone will pester me in real life. Mom has every right to worry. We're worrying too.

"Where are you right now?" She asks. "Are you safe? Are you at the dorms?"

"I'm with Matt," I answer, smiling when he finally joins me. He's brought our drinks, sitting them on the table. It's obvious that he's feeling out of place, sitting stiffly at my side while twiddling his thumbs in his lap. "We're at his place and we're fine," I add.

"I don't think you should go to class tomorrow, maybe not even all week!"

"I can't skip that much. I'll fall behind for sure." Although I've been considering it myself. "Maybe we'll stay here tomorrow, I don't know yet."

I envision Mom rubbing her temple or pacing the kitchen. She's mumbling to herself. She does that when she's upset. The sound punches me in the gut. I don't want her to worry. I wish we didn't have to worry either.

"Stay offline for a while," I say. "It'd be best for you and Dad not to read any of that either. Everything will calm down eventually."

I hope.

"You don't suppose the school will do anything to help, do you?" She mumbles. "Maybe have some extra security at the dorm?"

"I doubt it. This is all just some online drama that will pass." I'm not sure if I'm trying to convince her or myself.

"Yes, yes, it will pass," she whispers, sounding as if she's creating a mantra. She sniffles a few more times. When she next speaks, I can tell she's trying to be excited for me, and maybe deep down she is, "This Matt you're seeing, he's adorable."

My cheeks heat up with a blush. I peek at the man in question, who raises a brow at the attention. Smiling, I mumble, "Yeah, yeah, he is."

He tilts his head curiously.

"And you like him?"

"A lot."

"He's good to you?"

"The best."

She giggles. "That's good then. I want you to be happy, Dana, but I'm worried."

"I know."

"I won't keep you away from your boyfriend any longer," she says around a laugh that is both happy and sad. "Let me know what you plan to do tomorrow. Keep in touch or I'm going to lose it."

"I will, love you."

"Love you too. Tell Matt that I hope to meet him one day, preferably when this all calms down and I can handle it."

"Will do." After hanging up, I toss my phone on the table with a sigh.

Matt throws an arm around my shoulder, pulling me in to ask, "What'd she say?"

"She saw some stuff online. She's worried. She'd like to meet you one day." I smile at the blush that forms on his cheeks. "Later though when this has all calmed down. She didn't say it, but I know that she can't handle meeting you yet when she's all frazzled like this."

"I get it." He nods, rubbing my shoulder. "If you want, I could look into finding you a bodyguard for a little while."

"Like Joey?"

"Yeah."

"Do you really think that's necessary?"

Matt shrugs. "I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"I'm sure it's all just a bunch of nonsense. Some may ask me about it or glare, but I doubt we need to go that far," I say with a quick shake of my head. I don't want Matt spending money on me like that, at least I'm

assuming he'd pay for a guard out of pocket. I have no idea how that works, plus, it's just stuff online, right?

Nothing's going to happen.

~

Oh buddy, one issue after the other! The boys have decided not to lie. They're officially going to be open about their relationship, but how is that going to go? Dana's parents are concerned, do you think they'll be able to accept Matt one day? Nothing is going to happen, right? ;D

26. Distance Makes the Heart Fonder or Whatever

In the end, Matt and I skip two days of classes to let the heat die down a bit. Skipping is not a deterrent though, as we soon discover the moment we're driving out of the gated apartment complex. There are reporters everywhere, having waited for probably days on end to get their "next scoop."

Journalism is this odd form of necessary and unnecessary. We need journalists to report the truth, particularly about the world, informing the public of what is happening. At the same time, there are those hungry to delve into the lives of others that they have no right to do. Society is equally at fault, being so obsessed by celebrities, who are merely doing their job as entertainers, that paparazzi know they will get the views even if that means being morally questionable or outright wrong.

I'm thankful for Matt's tinted windows, even if I'm sure our silhouettes can be seen through the glass as paparazzi snap pictures. We pull out onto the main road, heading for class that may end up disastrous.

"Are you sure you don't want to take another day?" Matt asks, probably even more worried after seeing the amount of cameras still stationed outside his apartment complex, that are now following us in their own cars.

"We'll fall too far behind."

"I can try to talk with the school," he suggests. "See if we can do some online work for a week or so?"

"Then you're going to have everyone jumping on you about favoritism and celebrities getting special passes."

Matt sighs.

We ride in worrying silence, reaching school where Joey is already waiting. He escorts us from the car, which is parked on campus where you can't go without a parking permit. Paparazzi can't even make it in, but they're crowding the streets below, following us with Joey glaring angrily at any that dare get too close.

The reporters questions are fired so rapidly that I can't quite make them out. They're all along the same line, are you actually dating, is that really your boyfriend, won't you talk more about your drug scandal, then one catches my attention; *is it true you're returning to filming over Christmas break?*

I glance at Matt. He has mentioned not being sure if or when he'll return. Marceline mentioned something about filming over Christmas break too, before our argument. Now the paparazzi are here and asking, either because they have inside info or they're shooting in the dark. Either way, all of their questions are ignored then cast aside when campus security shows up. The reporters are deemed "nuisances," or so security claims, and they must vacate the premise.

Relief washes over the both of us. Matt sends me a smile.

"I'll walk with you to class," he says.

I have no argument there. People are staring at us, whispering when we walk by or even taking pictures. Joey threateningly steps towards a few or holds up his hand to try to give us some privacy.

"What was that about filming over break?" I ask.

"Huh?"

"The paparazzi asked. Did someone ask you to join a show or something?"

Matt hesitates. Seems I hit the nail right on the head.

"I got a request," he admits. "But I won't do it."

"Because you don't want to or because of what's happening?"

Matt bites his lip. I'm on a roll today.

"You should take the job if it's what you want to do," I say.

"We have enough heat as is. If there's news I'm doing a show--"

"Then people will talk about the great return of Matthew Jeneviere."

"The great return of the now taken Matthew Jeneviere," he corrects, smirking at the word *taken* , which has me blushing.

I clear my throat. "Well, they'd still probably talk more about your return then us, besides, I don't want to be what's holding you back."

"You aren't holding me back," he argues, squeezing my hand. He glances back, reminding me that Joey is right behind us. He's keeping an eye on everyone around us but also grinning. I've realized--Tori should be a bodyguard. He can be nosy and not get yelled at for it.

"I don't want to put more pressure on you," he whispers.

"We're going to keep going in circles about this, aren't we?"

"Probably."

"Just do it. The heat will die down eventually and Christmas vacation is right around the corner. I'll return home and, by the time we come back, all this will settle down."

"You hope so," he grumbles just as we reach my classroom. "You didn't ask what the show is about," he adds, grinning. "There will probably be a kiss scene. You ok with that?"

A k-k-kiss scene? With some other super attractive actor? But this is Matt's job... I can't get jealous. It's fine, it's totally fine!

"Um... y-yeah, of course."

"Really?" He leans in, so close that my eyes flutter closed expecting a kiss that never comes. He chuckles. "I don't mind if you're jealous. It's cute."

"...I'm not jealous."

He ignores that. "I'll see you after class. Don't give anyone your number if they ask--"

"Why would they ask?"

"You'd be surprised how people are going to treat you today. Remember, you're taken by a rich man with a terrifying bodyguard--" He points behind us at Joey, the not so terrifying bodyguard at the moment seeing as he's trying to gently scoop a caterpillar into the palm of his hand. "Well, terrifying when he needs to be, make sure they know that."

"I don't mind if you're jealous. It's cute," I mock, snorting in surprise when he plants a kiss on me then leaves.

Joey is totally staring at the ceiling when he walks by, caterpillar in hand. At least he *tries* to give us privacy.

The moment I step into class, all eyes are on me. Silence falls then whispers follow. I sit, eyes down and, as Matt warned, I'm met with odd interactions. Three people try to befriend me in class, a whole group gossips behind me, uncaring of me hearing the majority of the conversation, which consists of how I'm a gold digger and Matt will drop me like deadweight eventually.

Whatever. Ignore them, Dana. Christmas break will be here soon and you can get away for a while. Matt will return to filming what he loves. Everything will be fine.

~

I'm more than relieved when Christmas break is here, which almost makes me feel bad. Matt and I won't see each other for a bit more than six weeks. I'll definitely miss him, but I miss home and family too... and normalcy.

Ever since news of our dating status broke, life has been difficult, as expected. I'm very aware that the people speaking with me now are only interested in Matt, or even what kind of "normal" person could get with him. Most of the time I'm stuttering my way out of interactions and avoiding being online at all costs, those reactions are the worst. Hidden behind the anonymity of the internet, anyone can say anything and they will.

"Call me as often as you can," Matt says while squeezing me in a hug.

"I should be telling you that." I laugh. "You'll be so busy with filming I'm sure you'll forget about me."

"Never," he grunts, face buried in the nape of my neck. He breathes in deep, as if trying to imprint this feeling into his memories. I do the same, kissing his cheek.

"I would have liked to meet your parents," he mumbles.

"Maybe over summer break?" I suggest, leaning back. "You could come visit i-if you'd like."

"I'd like. I'd really like." He kisses me. "Thanks, Dana."

"For what?"

"You've put up with a lot because of me."

"Not because of you, because of people that can't get their noses out of other people's business."

"...you're kinda hot when you get feisty."

I burn up, pushing away from him. "D-Don't you have a shoot to g-get to?"

"Call me when you make it home."

"I'll call you whenever I please," I tease, leaning up to kiss his pouting lips. "I'll m-miss you."

"I'll miss you too."

Matt's phone buzzes, probably Joey telling him that they'll be late if they don't leave soon. We're both shivering by now anyway, standing outside of the dorms in the snow. Matt has shooting to start so he's leaving now while my parents are picking me up early tomorrow morning.

Matt holds my hand, backing up until our fingers slip. Then he takes two more steps back, nearly stumbling on the last. I laugh, watching his red face, which could be from the cold or a blush, turn away to head for his car. I wave goodbye until the car is out of the lot.

Six weeks already felt too long, but once the next day comes along and I see my mom running at me through the snows, I feel a bit better.

She nearly sends us both into the snow with how hard she squeezes me. Dad isn't far behind, moving slowly with his bad knee. Soon I'm wrapped up in their warm embrace, both squabbling like a gaggle of geese that I barely have the time to answer anything. Of course, they end up being most curious about Matt. I've been keeping them filled in, but Mom has a lot to say.

"How could these vultures attack an innocent boy?!" She bellows from the passenger seat with Dad nodding vehemently beside her. "The moment news broke that you two were dating there was nothing but negativity! Who are they to question your character? What makes them think they know you or your relationship? Don't people have anything better to do than shove their faces in the private lives of others?!"

"Preaching to the choir here, Mom." I laugh.

"And there's nothing you can do! You defend yourself and you're an asshole. You say nothing and you're proving that what they say is true. Nothing pleases them!" She throws her hands in the air, cursing when they smack the roof. "I have never met Matt, but I hope he is treating you well, Dana. All this drama isn't good for you and-and as a mother I--to think there are people saying such horrible things--t-there's no words!"

"He's a good guy, Mom. I...I really like him."

Mom turns, smiling, probably because my blush is obvious.

"Things will calm down over break," she says, maybe to make herself feel better more than anyone else. "And I hope we can meet him in person one day."

"Me too."

~

Aw, people just won't leave our boys alone. Also yay because Matt is getting back into filming! Will there be a kiss scene to make Dana jealous? ;D Or will that just make him feel even more inferior? D=

27. Pixelated Confessions

As expected, Matt is busy over break. We text and video call as often as we can, but it's often sporadic. Sometimes we share a few texts between two or three days, others we talk every night, but it's worth it. Matt talks about his days on set, telling funny stories of mishaps, forgetting lines, and messing with co-workers. He has missed this, and I'm going to have to get very used it.

A kiss scene, he said. I shouldn't be jealous. There's nothing going on. He's an actor, it's his job to play pretend, but when I saw the girl my composure shattered. It was an article talking about their upcoming series, showing Matt and her on set looking like the absolute superstars that they are. She's gorgeous, someone that can make anyone turn their head in interest. And they're going to be close on set, holding hands, hugging, kissing, close with each other all the time for work while I'm hundreds of miles away.

"Something wrong?" Matt asks, his face pixelated on my computer screen but still looking better than most. I don't know if I'm mad about it or happy because he is my boyfriend... for now, at least.

"Nope," I lie, leaning against the desk like I think being closer to the screen will somehow make me closer with him. "Are you done filming today? You look tired."

"Nah, just have a short break. Had some action scenes earlier. I've been away too long because they were harder to shoot than usual."

"You'll get used to it again."

"Will I?" he challenges. "What if I don't take up another job after this?"

I snort. "You will. You love it, it's obvious."

"Will you watch it?"

"What?"

"The series, when it airs."

My cheeks warm at the thought, a mixture of joy and guilt. Joy that Matt is doing what he loves and wants to share that with me. Guilt that I don't know if I can because I'm too damn self conscious. I don't know if I can handle seeing him with someone, acting or not, reminding me that he could leave me at any moment. That he should. That he could do so much better--ugh, I need to stop thinking like that... unfortunately, that's not how thoughts work. If we could change them on a whim then the world would be a much better place, and life would be a lot easier.

"Maybe," I tease, grinning at his pout. "Of course I'll watch it. We'll watch it together."

"Ugh, I don't know if I can. Watching myself act gives me the shivers." Matt actually shivers at the thought. "Makes me think of everything I could fix."

"Like you need to fix anything."

"Thanks! But your opinion is biased. Can't trust it."

I chuckle. "What's going to happen when school is back in? We only have a week left of break."

"I'm not taking as many credits this semester so I'll be going back and forth. Don't worry, though, I'll give you so much attention when we're back that you'll get sick of me."

My face is about to melt right off at this rate. "I don't know about that," I mumble, averting my gaze. "You may be the one that gets tired of me."

"Nonsense." He tilts his head, brows furrowing in sudden concern. "Something's up, I can sense it."

"Your senses are lying."

He rums, resting his chin on his hand while watching me quietly through the screen. I squirm in place, glancing about my room. I'm relieved that he can't see my TV. He may tease me for having one of his shows on pause in the background. I think I've watched everything that he's been in and, when I really miss him, I just put something on. I don't know if that's cute or creepy or both.

"Are people still bothering you?" he asks, frowning.

"Don't know. I haven't been on social media, although my parents haven't been complaining as much recently so I think it's safe to say that the heat has died down," I admit.

Not to mention Matt is back to filming, so, as predicted, that's what more people are talking about, as well as his co-star. There are already articles talking about their amazing chemistry. The show isn't even out yet! Give my heart a break.

"That's good then," he mutters, eying me suspiciously. "It's not fair."

"What isn't?"

"I can't force the truth out of you when I'm so far away."

"There's no truth to f-force." Damn, the stutter didn't help. I clear my throat just as someone calls for Matt. I recognize the voice and immediately feel sick to my stomach.

"Matt, are you ready? Filming is about to start back up," Natasha calls, appearing in the background. She's barely a speck on the screen, standing in the doorway with Joey behind her, but even from afar her looks are blinding.

"Be right there!" He calls, glancing back at me to say goodbye, but then he frowns. I tilt my head, confused when he hums, "Give me five minutes, Nat, I'll be out."

She nods and waves then shuts the door. Before I can say goodbye, Matt points at the webcam and accuses, "This has to do with Natasha."

"What does?"

"My senses tell me I'm right."

I would argue, but he doesn't let me.

"Don't bottle it up," he almost pleads, scratching at the back of his neck. He sighs then leans against the table. "Talk to me, Dana. About anything. About everything. If you don't then... well, we'll have a repeat of what happened with me."

I raise a brow at that.

"Me being paranoid, asking to see your phone, worrying over my mom and what she said to you. It's not easy to talk about what's wrong, but we have to or it'll breed resentment and tear us apart."

"But it's stupid," I mumble, staring at my fingers fiddling nervously in my lap.

"It's not stupid if it's bothering you this much."

"...I don't want you to feel bad."

"I don't want you to feel bad either."

I'm almost tempted to sit here until someone comes banging on his door to drag him out, but he's right. I know that. I've always known we should talk about this, but I don't want to. I'm scared he'll think it's stupid or I'll somehow make him feel like shit. Maybe he'll feel bad about his work, which I certainly don't want either.

"Dana," he calls, which shouldn't be allowed. He shouldn't be able to whisper my name like that.

"I don't... I feel like I'm not g-good enough, for you," I admit, hating that my eyes are already brimming with tears. I swiftly wipe them away with the back of my hand. "You're this, t-talented, hard working, absolutely amazing actor and I'm-I'm just me. I'm some kid from a little town t-that is nothing compared to you or-or anyone that you work with. You're acting or having photoshoots with a-all these equally as amazing, insanely attractive, almost otherworldly people and I keep thinking, that's what you deserve, someone like that, someone as breathtaking as you are and that'll never be me. I'm just Dana."

Silence follows my admission. I can't bring myself to face the screen, fearful of Matt's reaction, the expression he's wearing or what he's about to say. Scared of how I may melt into the floor from sheer embarrassment if I dare face him, so I don't. I sit here, head down and hating every little thing about me. I'm too short. Too skinny. Too pale. Too freckled.

Then he snorts and I forget my rule of not looking at him. He's hiding his red face behind his hands. Is he that upset?

But then he drops his hands, revealing a soft smile when says, "Funny, I was thinking I wasn't good enough for you."

"...are you crazy?"

"Are you?" he challenges, his eyes softening to the point that I worry I'll drown in them. Somehow, the way he's looking at me has changed and it makes my heart race to the point that it hurts.

"I always think, he must be so annoyed," Matt says, nodding slowly. "It must be hard to date someone like me, can't ever have a normal life, has to be put through so much because no one can leave us alone, has to face the consequences of my stupid past and crazy mother. He'll grow tired of me. Tired of the mess I make. Tired of the pain I bring. Honestly, I only have my looks and money, which he isn't nearly as interested in, so, the time will eventually come when he sees me and realizes that *just Matt* isn't good enough."

He was thinking like that? And I never realized, never even considered it...

"I'm not annoyed with you, not at all. I don't feel that way," I say, pouting when he smirks.

"Yeah, I don't feel that way either," he says. "Just like you see me as Matt, not only a celebrity, you need to see that those I'm working with are the same. Natasha is another person juggling school, work, friends, relationships, all of it. She's no different than me, no different than you, and, if you're that worried about looks--" he clears his throat, face going beet red when he admits, "I thought you were adorable the moment I saw you and you're even cuter to me now."

Oh no, I'm going to spontaneously combust. What the hell am I meant to say to that?!

"I...you..." the words are lodged in my throat, making Matt laugh. He's red down to his neck, up to the tip of his ears.

There's another knock at the door. It's Joey telling him that he has to go. Matt doesn't leave yet, though. He looks at me with those same eyes that threaten to never let me go. I actually hope that's exactly what they'll do.

"When I see you again, I'll prove just how fucking crazy I am about just Dana," he whispers, then the call ends.

How is that fair? With a promise like that, I'm not going to be able to stop thinking about it until we do see each other again.

~

Smooth, Matt, real smooth. So the two have talked! Both our boys were worried about not being good enough for the other, crazy how even the people we think should be confident aren't always so confident, huh? :) How is Matt going to prove how crazy he is about Dana, hmm? HMMM?!

28. A Shot of Cheese, Actually, Make It Double!

School is back in and I am tackled the moment I open the door to my dorm.

"Dana!" Tori calls, throwing the both of us to the floor. Other students pass by, snickering at his shenanigans. "Tell me everything!"

"What everything?"

"Everything-everything." Tori hops to his feet, holding out his hand for me then he's shoving me into the room. A few students stare--because of the noise or who I am? I'm not sure, but I hope it was the ruckus.

"How was break? Any drama with the drama star? Were your friends back home overtaken with jealousy? Give me all the details," Tori insists.

I snicker. "I'm glad to see you haven't changed a bit over break."

"You'd hate it if I did."

"I don't know about hate."

Tori hops on his bed, watching my movements with a wide grin. I take a seat as well, shrugging when I admit, "There's not much to tell. I had a nice, calm break, which I definitely needed."

"For sure. Even I was a nervous wreck after everything got out." Tori shakes his head. "Props to you for putting up with it."

Before I can respond, my phone hums in my pocket. Tori smirks while I check my text, trying not to blush because Matt's text is simple. There's nothing to blush about!

Matt: *You back at the dorms?*

Me: *Yeah. Are you home?*

Matt: *Yep. I can come pick you up in ten, if you want?*

Me: *Sure. Let me know when you're here :)*

Although this is to be expected, we haven't seen each other in weeks, I feel like my heart is on the verge of exploding. What Matt said last week, *"when I see you again, I'll prove just how fucking crazy I am about just Dana,"* has been at the forefront of my mind. Even more so now. What did he mean? What are his plans?

"Lover boy texting you already?" Tori chuckles. "Ah, young love." He jumps to his feet, heading towards the door. "I'm meeting up with Chelsea. If you'd like, I can grab an ice pack for ya on the way back."

"An ice pack?" I whisper, blinking up at Tori's grin.

"For your hips."

"Why would--" My eyes widen, face about to melt from the sudden intense heat building in my cheeks. Tori throws his head back with a maniacal cackle.

"Have fun tonight!" he calls, leaving with a flamboyant wave. The door clicks shut behind him.

Although I'm alone, there's no silence. My mind is imploding on itself, hating that I can't deny I wasn't thinking the same thing, but that's understandable, right? We've been dating a while and, I, well, I'm interested and Matt seems to be interested so... so I don't know what the fuck I'm doing! What if that is his plan and I'm going in blind?!

So, for the next ten minutes, I pace the room wondering what I'm expecting, should I be expecting it, and what the hell I'm meant to do. By the time Matt messages me, I'm shivering so much that I may be vibrating through the very fabric of the universe. My keys rattle when I lock the dorm door and people are definitely staring as I walk by, limbs completely straight.

The hair on the back of my neck stands, sending a shiver through me. I spin around, surveying the lounge. It's busier than usual, students and their families piling in and out. Plenty continue to watch me so I shrug off the feeling and continue the abnormally long walk to the parking lot. Matt waits in his car, probably smirking behind those tinted windows as I shuffle through the snow to get to the passenger side. The car is warm, heating my already chilled skin.

My breath catches in my throat when facing Matt, smiling and bright-eyed. Somehow more beautiful than before. Webcams really don't do him justice. And when he leans in it only proves how much I've really missed him because I meet him half way, catching his lips in a kiss. I breathe deep through my nostrils, maybe a sigh or maybe from shock or maybe as an excuse to keep him close after so long apart. His hand slips to the back of my neck, thumb gently caressing my goosebump covered skin.

When we break apart, Matt rests his forehead against mine. One hand remains at the back of my neck, the other cradles my face. His lips ghosts over mine when he whispers, "Hey."

"Hi." I laugh against his lips when they peck my own then again and again until I say, "I missed you."

"Took the words out of my mouth," he says. "I missed you too. We're definitely not separating over all of summer break. I may drop dead."

"Drama queen."

He chuckles, leaning away from me. I miss his heat, his touch, everything that I've been without these last few weeks. But then he takes my hand, interlocking our fingers as he pulls out of the lot.

"Hope you're hungry," he says.

"Did you order something?"

"Nope."

I tilt my head, curious. "We going to stop somewhere?"

He shakes his head, cheeks reddening with every word. "I'm going to cook for you."

"You...you are?"

He nods, thumb rubbing the back of my hand. "If you're ok with that?"

"Yeah, yeah, I, uh, I mean, you can cook?"

"I've been practicing. Don't worry, my sisters were guinea pigs." He snickers. "I promise I won't poison you."

"I can help?" I suggest, honestly just wanting an excuse to be stuck to him like glue. Now that we're together, I don't know if I'll be able to part from him.

"You can be my support. Give me compliments. Tell me I'm doing well. Give me all the attention that I've missed while you were away."

"Someone's getting needy."

"Are you complaining?"

"No. I-I don't mind." I squeeze Matt's hand, blushing when he lifts the hold to press a kiss to the back of my hand.

The rest of the car ride is filled with short updates of school, what classes we're taking and such. We don't share any classes this semester, which isn't surprising. We have completely different majors, but I am a bit disappointed. Maybe next semester we can sign up for a general education class together? For some reason, when I voice that Matt beams so bright that he'd give the sun a run for its money.

"What?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I like it."

"Like...what?"

"That you're thinking about us months from now." He smirks at my growing blush. "Make sure to think years ahead too."

I'm going to die if he keeps this up!

Once Matt parks his car at his apartment complex, we rush to get inside where it's safe and warm. I'm not sure what I was expecting when I opened his apartment door, but it definitely isn't what I find before me now. Matt shuffles beside me, beaming with a mixture of nerves and excitement as he asks, "So...what do you think?"

Matt has decked out his apartment with twisted fairy lights so that it has an almost ethereal glow. They're stringed through the industrial pipes along the walls, wrapped around the coffee table and hanging from anything that he could get them around. There's a tent in the middle of the living room floor, flaps open so that we can watch TV with pillows and blankets stuffed inside. Once I step further inside, I see that he decked out the kitchen too. There's a tablecloth on the table and some unlit candles.

"Executed by a drama professional," I tease, peering up at Matt's proud smile.

"Thanks. I've taken plenty of notes." Then he deflates a little, pulling a me move and twisting the end of his shirt. "But do *you* like it?"

"H-How couldn't I?" I mumble, hoping that in this lighting my blush isn't too obvious.

"Cool...uh, d-do you want to eat first?" He nearly trips over his own feet, refusing to face me as he heads towards the kitchen. "Or we could watch something and cuddle? Whichever you want to do."

"We could eat first."

"Ok. I'll start it then." Matt shuffles to the kitchen where I hear some clanking followed by quiet cursing. I try to hide my chuckles behind my

hand, especially since I'm as nervous as he is, if not more. If even Matt is stuttering and stumbling around then that means something!

I join Matt in the kitchen, shyly standing beside him. When he steps closer so that our arms brush, I take another chance and wrap my arm around his then lean my head on him. Peering up, I'm pleased to find him smiling as goofily as I am. And for the rest of his cooking adventure he has to struggle trying to make a meal with me glued to his arm. Not that it's entirely my fault. Any time I tried to be helpful or back away he was adamant that I stay where I was because, apparently, he was recharging.

When dinner is ready (which is italian stuffed pork chops, so Matt claims) he watches me across the table. He bites his bottom lip when I take the first bite, surprised with the taste. My eyes widen and he frowns.

"Is it bad?"

I quickly shake my head. "No, no! It's really good actually."

He pouts. "So you're shocked that I'm a good cook?"

"...a little."

"Get used to it." He lowers his gaze, smiling sweetly. "I'll cook for you more."

Ouch, is that my heart trying to break out of my ribcage?

I use stuffing my face as an excuse not to respond. Dinner is mostly quiet, but that isn't a complaint. Matt doesn't seem to mind it either seeing as I think he's more amused by my reactions. When I risk raising my gaze, I often find him watching me across the table. All he has to do is smile and I'm a puddle of goo that sinks in his seat, shoving more food into my mouth until I nearly choke. Then I have to chug a glass of tea and pretend like I'm not embarrassing myself every few seconds. It's his fault! He's being all...charming. My heart can't stand this!

Once dinner is done, we head to the living room. Matt crawls into the tent, grinning like the cheshire cat when he waves me in. I follow, cursing in surprise when he pulls me into his lap. His thighs rest on either side of me, arms around my waist as he snuggles close. The blankets and pillows are plentiful, wrapping up in warmth that only intensifies from my insane blushing. Seriously, could my cheeks take a chill pill?

"W-What are we going to watch?" I ask, shivering when his warm breath tickles the back of my neck. I stop breathing when he kisses my nape.

"No TV yet. I--well--don't laugh," he says, digging through the blankets for something. "I made this for you."

I hum when he hands me a jar filled with folded multi-colored paper. I peer back at him, surprised to find his face almost rivaling mine in color. He clears his throat, eyes staring up when he explains, "What we talked about over break, it worried me that there may be times when I can't console you. So, when you're feeling down, when you worry, when your confidence is low, you can read those and remind yourself why I'm crazy about you."

He really is trying to kill me, isn't he?

I bite back my probably stupid grin, peering down at the jar that is eating away at my curiosity. When I pop open the lid, Matt whimpers, "Can't you read them alone?"

His plea is ignored as I grab the first piece, opening it to find Matt's scribbled writing that leaves me short of breath; *When you're gone, all I can think about is when I'll see you again.*

"C-Cheesy," I whisper, the paper trembling in my grasp.

Matt reaches for the jar. "I can take it ba--"

"No." I smack his hand away, cradling the jar to my chest. "It's mine now. No take backs."

He chuckles, resting his chin on my shoulder as I slip the paper back in and close it up. What's really crazy is how many are in there. How many did he write? And how many are going to make my heart burst? All of them, probably.

"Dana," he calls, making me start to believe that maybe I actually do like my name. At least when Matt says it.

"Dana," he repeats, sending a chill down my spine. I risk peering at him, trapping myself in his gaze. "I know this is tough for you. I know we can't stop how we feel or what we worry over, but we can choose who to talk to about those feelings and worries. I want to be that choice for you and I want you to be that choice for me. I don't want a repeat of what happened last time. I don't want to lose you either."

He squirms behind me, pulling me flush against his chest. His lips hover over mine, making it extremely difficult to focus on his words; "I want to be here with some kid from a little town that is amazing, insanely attractive, breathtaking, almost otherworldly. I want to be here with you, Dana. Just you."

I kiss him, too overwhelmed with his feelings, with my own to possibly form a coherent thought. I hope that he can sense them, feel them pressed into our kiss because there are no words. None that can even begin to describe the humming in my veins, coursing through me until my nerves are raw.

I wish I had a way with words. Wish I had something for this moment, but when we break apart and Matt presses his forehead to mine, all I can say is; "I want to be here with you too."

"Good." He hums. "Because I don't plan on letting you go." Then he bites his lip, his arms tensing when he whispers, "Stay tonight?"

For once, I feel a sudden surge of confidence when I nod, smiling into the kiss that Matt gives in response.

~

Cheese! Fluff! Cute, precious beans! You're welcome ^^ Just a heads up, there should be five or six more chapters then this story will be at an end~ so what do you think can happen in the time we got left with the boys? :)

29. I Smell Your Hypocrisy

The following day is spent together, kissing under the covers, cuddling on the couch, whispering cheesy lines that make my ears burn with a blush. Intimacy doesn't miraculously become less heart fluttering after sex. It's just as blush worthy, just as breathtaking, and over time it may become a norm, but the appreciation and the love of that intimacy remains, perhaps in a different way than before. I don't know when ours may change, or if it will since I'll always be a blundering fool, but I know looking back on these moments as the weeks and months and years pass, they'll still make me blush.

Staying the weekend at Matt's resulted in some sporadic messages from Tori insisting that I update him on my health. Is his mind ever out of the gutter? I ignored him since there's no way I can reply without bursting into a ball of flames then melting into a pile of bubbling goo. He can use his imag--wait, I'd rather he not...

Come Monday morning, I don't want to separate with Matt, which shouldn't be surprising. This is becoming our norm. I wake up for class but am incapable of getting out of bed. Matt is curled around me, arms and legs intertwined with my own. Our cocoon of warmth is tempting to lay in for a few more days, avoid the cold of winter and prying eyes on campus, but we give in to our alarms and make way to class twenty minutes later.

"Do you think it has calmed down on campus?" I ask. There were a few paparazzi outside Matt's apartment complex. Nothing compared to before break, though.

"I hope so," he replies. "If not then I seriously recommend a bodyguard."

"I'm not comfortable with you paying for that."

"I'm not comfortable worrying all day about your safety."

I pick mindlessly at the fray of my jacket. "I'll think about it."

Matt hums. I know he wants to say more, but all he does is take my hand. I interlock our fingers, enjoying the comfortable ride to school while hoping it isn't as chaotic. My hope pays off. We're briefly glanced at, some whispers start up when we pass by, but nothing more. Matt walks me to my first class without a hitch, even leaning in for a kiss that makes me as red as a fire truck when I go into class. Tori isn't with me this semester so I'm left alone, listening to our professor go on about the syllabus.

Paranoia takes over me. I search the room briefly, eyes glancing over other students. The hair on the back of my neck stands up. I turn around, thinking someone is watching me, but there's no one paying me much attention. Well, nothing more than the usual few whispers here or there that may or may not have to do with me. Who really knows. I'm being paranoid because of what happened before break. I shrug it off, at least until class ends and there's a commotion outside the school building.

Is it Matt? I told him earlier he didn't have to come get me afterwards since he's on the other side of campus.

It is not Matt waiting outside the school building. It's Marceline. She has the aura of a star, something of far away beauty that you should fear getting close to. She stands with her head held high, two men in suits at her side. When she spots me at the entrance of the building, she waves then beckons me over.

This can't be good.

I don't know what Marceline wants, or rather, what she hopes to accomplish. I sure as hell don't know how she found me so quickly and easily. I don't really want to know either. After hearing about who she really is, I only know that this is not a random visit. She has a purpose, one that involves controlling Matt to benefit her.

I search the area for any sign of him, relieved to discover he isn't nearby. Although we talked things over, I wouldn't blame him for panicking when seeing me with Marceline. Trauma isn't gotten over easily, sometimes it never fully is. I don't want Matt to be more upset so, when I walk up to

Marceline, I take some notes from Matt and bluntly say, "I have nothing to say to you."

Marceline doesn't even bat an eye. "I never asked for you to say anything," she responds. "But you will listen." She crosses her arms, staring down at me like I'm nothing more than trash. "This relationship won't last. It's a sad joke, one that you're clinging to, that many would cling to. Someone like you cannot be with my son."

"Someone like me meaning what? Because I don't have money? Because our relationship doesn't benefit you?"

She scoffs.

"I don't need to listen to you so I'm not going to." I'm shaking when I turn away.

Then I freeze when she has the audacity to say, "He isn't your cash cow."

Something snaps. I approach her so fast that her guards step between us. Marceline glares when I hiss through my teeth, "You, of all people, do not have the damn right to say that. I know what you did. I know what you are. You disgust me."

That gets a reaction. Her lips press tightly together, brow knitted in annoyance.

I step back, glancing at those that have slowed down to listen in. Some run off when they're caught, others only see this as a chance to get their brief moment of fame by trending on twitter. They're pulling out their phones, recording the interaction. Marceline's guards surround us, holding up their hands to block them.

"I know what you're trying to do and it's not going to work," I continue on. "I'm not going anywhere and I sure as hell won't let you hurt Matt anymore."

She looks me up and down, nose wrinkled in disgust. "And here I thought you were some brat with no backbone. You're tougher than you look, I'll give you that, however--" she leans in, whispering. "The world devours naive kids like you. Sooner or later, you'll learn that."

She walks away, taking none of the discomfort with her. Thanks to the interaction, albeit brief, the mass attention has returned. Students whisper when I stomp by, hands shaking with anger. I shouldn't have done more, should have said more, should have screamed in her face! But that is Matt's privacy. People are digging into his life enough. Maybe that's why she approached me in public. She doesn't want her dirty laundry aired out, but she probably suspected I wouldn't do it either, or maybe she had another reason. Who knows with that crazy piece of shit! UGH! I hate her!

I pull out my phone to message Matt. My hands are shaking so bad that I can barely text. My dad is like this too, shaking when he gets upset. My mom is a cryer, she bursts into tears. I'm surprised I didn't get that trait too.

Me: *Marceline showed up. I'm ok, though. Well, I'm mad, like, really mad. Can you believe she wanted to lecture me about using you for money? HER, OF ALL PEOPLE?! I'm sorry. I don't want to upset you and she's gone so it's done, but I didn't want you to find out through gossip or something. DON'T YOU DARE SKIP CLASS! I'll see you at lunch, ok? The library, like usual.*

Matt: *Thank you for telling me... but how the hell am I supposed to focus on class? What else did she say? Is anyone bothering you? At least wait in class for me. I'll pick you up and we'll go to the library together.*

Me: *Ok, but I'm serious, don't skip class. If you do, I won't kiss you for a week.*

Matt: *You wouldn't last.*

Me: *Is that a challenge?*

Matt: *...no D:*

Matt isn't the only one worried about focusing in class. I'm relieved today is the first day back so we really aren't amounting to much, otherwise there would be no point in attending school. I can't focus in class, coming down from an anger that only escalates when Tori notifies me that I should steer clear of social media. Some people made posts about the argument with Marceline, luckily none actually heard much of our conversation, but there's new gossip that mommy dearest isn't fond of the boy her son is seeing. Seems most are siding with her, calling me a gold digger so she has the right to be protective. If only they knew how wrong they were.

When class ends, I wait patiently for Matt's arrival. A few minutes later, he peeks his head into the room. His face is a little flushed. He might have ran over here. I don't have time to ask. He's across the room, wrapping his arms around me in a moment.

"We should have skipped today," he grumbles.

"She would have just come another day." I hold him tight, hoping to ease the tension in his shoulders. He's shaking. I can take a guess it's because Marceline visited me, but this reaction isn't like the last one.

"What did she say?"

"She said you aren't my cash cow."

He growled.

"Our relationship won't last. Someone like me shouldn't be with you, stuff like that. She was just trying to get under my skin," I explain to him, rubbing his back when he tenses. "She's not going to, though."

He leans back, looking down at me.

"She pisses me off, but you're stuck with me," I mumble, tapping my fingers against his back to an unknown tune. "So y-you don't need to worry about me going a-anywhere."

And why is it now I start stuttering again? I was doing so well earlier!

Matt laughs, sounding and looking relieved. He shakes his head, runs his fingers through my hair then kisses me.

"What was that for?" I ask.

"A gift," he says, kissing me again. He rests his forehead against mine. "You've come a long way."

"I don't know what that means."

"If she said that to you a month ago or even a week, how would you have felt?"

I am about to respond when realization settles in that Matt's right. I have come a long way. Just over break I was worrying about exactly what Marceline brought up. What *would* I have done if she had shown up earlier? Would I have ran? Would I have agreed? Not to say that I'm completely over my worries, that isn't how we work. Reassurance helps, talking helps, but only time heals. Building confidence will come through that time and this moment is proof that I've started.

"I think I d-deserve another gift then."

He smirks. "Really?"

"Maybe two."

"How about three?"

"I prefer even numbers."

"Four then."

"Acceptable."

Four more kisses later we're finally on our way to lunch hand in hand. Joey keeps close, eying anyone that even dares to look our way. Whatever he's paid, I think he deserves a raise.

"I'm sorry you have to deal with this," Matt says when we ascend the stairs of the student center to get to the cafeteria.

"Don't apologize. It's not your fault."

"You're too good to me."

"I could say the same to you." A sudden chill ripples down my spine. I spin around, rubbing my neck while surveying the area.

"Is something wrong?" Matt asks, looking alongside me.

"No, cold chill, I guess."

After we get our food, we head for the library. For a moment we considered eating in the cafeteria but all the staring unsettled me. I swear eyes are following us all the way to the library, even when we're sitting down with our meal. I'm getting way too paranoid for my own good. Hopefully, in time, I'll get used to all this attention.

"If she shows up again just ignore her," Matt says between bites of his lunch. "And call me. She doesn't have the right to bother you."

"I don't want her to bother you either."

"Better that we're bothered together, don't you think?" he asks, grinning. "We can complain over a tub of ice cream."

"That does sound tempting."

Matt nods eagerly. "I'll make sure to always keep one in the freezer."

"Sounds like you're making an excuse to always have ice cream."

"Or a reason for you to always come over."

"You don't need a reason for that," I mumble, blushing when Matt wiggles his eyebrows.

"Stay tonight?" he asks, which only worsens my blush and has me choking on my food. Matt chuckles when handing me my drink to chug. I smack my chest a few times, hating myself for reacting so obviously.

"Y-You have a shoot tonight," I say.

"I'll be done by nine."

"I-I shouldn't. The dorm s-supervisor will probably lecture me a-about it." Matt pouts until I add, "Maybe T-Thursday or Friday so I c-can get away with it."

Matt reaches across the table to interlock our fingers. "Can't wait."

I shove more food into my mouth, incapable of responding to that or the way Matt is looking at me with that stupidly attractive smile.

When I return to the dorm after class I begin to regret not taking Matt's offer. Tori is at his desk working on some homework when I open the door. His grin is so lecherous that I feel the need to jump into the shower immediately.

"Why hello there," he says, throwing one leg over the other and resting his hands on his knee. "How was your weekend?"

"I'm leaving." I'm about to shut the door when someone brushes by me, running their shoulder into mine. I curse, stumbling towards the door while glaring at their back that disappears down the hall. They didn't even apologize.

"You aren't going anywhere!" Tori hollers, grabbing me during my moment of shock to drag me into the room, shutting the door to my escape.

I spend the rest of the evening trying to avoid Tori's questions that I know are more about making me embarrassed than getting actual information. I'm oddly grateful, though. With his ridiculous self around I don't have time to think about Marceline or any of the gossip started from her visit. I'm weirdly entertained until Matt is done with work and we text through the

night until I finally fall asleep with my phone in my grasp, excited for tomorrow to come so I can see him again.

~

THAT'S RIGHT, DANA! STAND UP TO MARCELINE, SHOW HER WHAT'S UP! Our boys are growing up so fast ^^ Is this the end of Marceline interfering? Can our boys survive this semester without any trouble?

30. Growing Boy Is Grown Up

I'm oddly glad to be back to work. There's a sense of normalcy that I've been without for longer than I thought. Although I was away for break, when I return the shop feels natural. I know what to do and where to go. Everything is simple. Smile at customers. Take their orders. Get the job done, although there are some instances where people try to small talk. It's happening more now since I'm no longer a nameless Subway worker. Now I'm the guy dating Matthew Jeneviere, and people want to know. Not that I tell them anything. They're easy to drive away with the reasoning of a line or work.

The owners of this Subway are probably secretly grateful, too. Due to my sudden popularity, there are definitely more customers compared to last semester. Another thing I'm oddly grateful for. More customers means that I'm kept busy. There are a few instances that are unsettling. Some customers are too nosy, too persistent. They wait until I get off my shift to attempt to talk or stay in the store even when they're done eating. Thankfully, I have Matt.

He picks me up after work as often as he can. Seeing his car park along the curb, waiting patiently for my arrival, eases any tension left from the day. Unfortunately, that won't be happening tonight. I have the closing shift, but Matt's filming won't be done until even later than that. I promised to text him when I leave and when I get to the dorm, otherwise he may go mad with worry. We wouldn't want that!

"Careful on your way home, Dana," Martha says as she locks up the dark Subway. She waves goodbye when heading for the bus stop.

I text Matt to let him know I'm heading home now. He's quick to respond, reminding me to text when I get to the dorm. I roll my eyes, about to reply when I hear footsteps behind me. I glance back. There are some students rowdy at the local bars, stumbling and shrieking when it isn't even midnight yet. I shrug it off and continue on my way.

But when I pass the local drug store, someone reaches out from the alleyway. I barely have time to curse in surprise before there's a fist in my gut then another across my cheek. I hit the ground hard, groaning then curling in on myself when a boot rams into my ribcage and another and another. The streetlights don't shine here. There's only looming buildings in the dark and the bare silhouettes of strangers above me. I don't know who they are or how many, only that there's definitely more than one. I'm being bombarded on all sides, kicked until my face beats against the cement. There's the taste of blood, echoing pain as my vision blurs.

I might have screamed, or have been screaming the whole time, because the perpetrators suddenly leave, shouting surprised curses as they disappear down the alley. Someone is kneeling next to me, another is shouting down the alley. I see the blaring light of a phone. I think someone is asking for my name, but my head is throbbing.

Then everything goes black.

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When my eyes open, I'm in a hospital room. My body aches. A machine beeps at my bedside. Then the bed shifts slightly. Matt's red-rimmed eyes come into focus.

"He's awake!" Matt frantically calls. He takes my hand, frowning when I flinch. Even my hands are bruised. He's about to release until I slip my fingers between his.

"W-What happened?" I groan.

"You don't remember?"

"Mm, I was... on my way home."

"Someone jumped you," he says, hanging his head low in shame.

Before I can ask more, a doctor and some nurses come in. Matt steps away, allowing them to look me over. No bones are broken, but I have a mild
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concussion and a lot of nasty scrapes and bruises. They want me to stay overnight to be monitored. There's more to do once they're gone. Next, the cops come in. They attempt to get all the information they can from me, but the most I give is that I remember being dragged into an alley, kicked by multiple people, then they were gone.

"Has anyone been acting strange around you lately? Someone who has made you feel uncomfortable?" the cop asks.

I don't want to answer that, especially when Matt shifts his weight. People have been acting strange and making us feel uncomfortable since our dating news.

"Plenty of people," Matt finally answers for me. "He's dating a celebrity so everyone and their mother want to stick their noses in."

The cop frowns then faces me. "There's no one specific, though? No instances you can think of?"

"Some customers a-are too n-nosy at work, but none that r-really stand out," I answer honestly. With such limited information, the cops can only do so much. My parents aren't pleased about that, about any of this. Mom is already on her way. She'll be here in a few hours. She got herself a hotel room nearby for the week. Hopefully she doesn't try to drag me out of school.

"It was my mom," Matt says, sitting at my bedside with his hands fisted in his lap. "It has to be."

"You honestly think your mom hired people to beat me up?"

"I wouldn't put it past her." He puts his head in his hands. His shoulders shake. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry, Dana."

"Don't apologize," I insist, running my fingers through his hair. He lifts his head, leaning into my hand when I cradle his cheek. "Don't blame yourself for something you had nothing to do with."

"But I did. This wouldn't have happened if you weren't dating me."

"This has nothing to do with you and everything to do with them, whoever did this."

I wish I could be convincing. I wish I could remove the sorrow from Matt's eyes. Instead, he only drops the subject and brings up another, "Please tell me that now you'll agree to a bodyguard."

As much as I hate to say it; "That would probably be best."

Joey knocks at the door. He pokes his head in to say, "Visiting hours are about up."

"Right." Matt gently kisses my cheek. "The hospital agreed to let Joey stay with you tonight, considering the situation."

"What about you?"

"I'm going straight home then I'll be back tomorrow to pick you up." He gnaws at his bottom lip. "Do... do you think your mom is going to hate me?"

I shake my head. "No. She's just worried. W-Why don't we do something together tomorrow, t-the three of us?"

Matt blushes when he mumbles, "We can do that."

"I'll call you when I get discharged tomorrow. We'll meet up to get food or something."

"I don't think we should go out anywhere," he says, giving me a brief glance over.

"Ah, yeah, probably not." I'm covered in bruises and insanely sore. "We could eat at your place then?"

"Sure."

With our plans in place, Matt heads home. Joey watches TV in the hospital room with me until my mom arrives. She practically rips the door off it's hinges, bursting into the room with tears in her eyes. Joey doesn't get a time to introduce himself before she's at my bedside, looking over my injuries while sputtering gibberish that I don't even attempt to decipher. This is Panicked Mother language.

"I'm fine, Mom," I tell her, but it falls upon deaf ears.

Her coddling continues for at least another fifteen minutes until she has calmed down. She sits at my bedside, going over the details of what happened, as well as being introduced to Joey. He promises to keep an eye on me until Matt hires another bodyguard, which, knowing him, has probably already happened. A new one may turn up tomorrow.

"Dana, why don't you take a semester off?" Mom suggests. I saw it coming the moment she answered my call in tears.

"If I take a semester off, who knows if I'll ever come back."

"Then why don't you quit your job? That way you won't ever be out late on your own."

"But school--"

"Your father and I will handle it," she lies. The whole reason I got a part time job was because of how expensive school is.

"If I quit, are you or dad going to have to pick up a second job?"

"If we have to then we will."

"That's not fair to you."

"This--" she gestures to my bruised self in bed. "Isn't fair, Dana. It's not right. You can't expect me to go home after this and not worry about you constantly."

"Matt's getting me a bodyguard."

"That's a precaution, not a guarantee. Something could still happen," she whimpers, the tears returning. She wipes them away with the back of her hand.

"I... I don't want to hide away in a hole," I explain, watching Mom's eyes widen. "I-I came to school to make friends, to try new things, and I-I've been doing that. I've made friends. I met Matt. I've stood up for him, and for myself. There's some bad happening right now, but there's been a lot of good too. I don't want to change that by hiding."

For some reason, Mom's eyes start to water more. I frantically search the room for a possible explanation. Not sure how the room will explain, but it's worth a shot.

"Dana," she whispers, pulling me into a hug that I wince at. She releases me enough that it isn't painful. "You've grown up so much."

"I-I would hope so. I'm in college."

She laughs and presses a kiss to my temple. "You know what I mean."

I'm not really sure I do, but it's nice to hear.

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The fated moment has arrived. Mom is staring down Matt like a starving lioness and he is the sick, helpless gazelle. He stands by his car stiff as a board, dressed a bit more formal than usual with a button down shirt and no hat. He's stunning, of course, but Mom has yet to fall for his charms. She eyes him suspiciously with me standing nervously between them.

"A-Are you hungry, Mom?" I ask. "Uh, Matt and I t-thought we could all go grab something to eat."

Matt eagerly nods. "If that's alright with you."

Mom shrugs. "I could eat."
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She slips into the passenger seat of Matt's car. I know she's doing this on purpose, but I'm not entirely sure of her reasoning yet. Matt and I make no comment about where she chose to sit. I take the back seat. Joey drives a car behind us.

"There's a really g-good italian place nearby that we can order from. Does that sound good, Mom?" I ask. I get another shrug in response, which is odd for my normally chatter box of a mother.

And so begins the interrogation. Mom asks about Matt's schooling, his work, where he grew up, and an embarrassing 'what do you like about my son,' which has me poking her in the side. She hisses, "What? I need to make sure he gives a good answer."

"You don't need to answer that," I say to Matt, who has been blushing from nerves since the moment Mom started talking.

"It's ok," he coughs. "Would it be cheesy to say I like everything?"

"Absolutely," Mom answers.

"Then I like how considerate he is of others, even if that means not being considerate to himself. I like how kind he is, even to those that aren't kind to him. I like how easily he blushes, how he stands up for others even when he's nervous. I like that he treats people with respect, regardless of who they are--"

"Matt," I whisper, red up to my ears and on the verge of passing out from how fast my heart is racing. "Y-You can s-stop now."

"No, go on," Mom says, desperately trying to hold back a smile and failing miserably. "Continue praising my son because you're also praising me. I raised him, y'know."

Matt snorts and I throw myself against the back seat. She's been messing with him this whole time, hasn't she? Pretending to be the tough mom when, in reality, she's been holding back her smile.

"I like you, Matt. You have good taste," Mom says when patting his shoulder. "Dana is a sweetheart so you better take care of him."

Matt smiles like a fool. "I will."

At least something good has come out of this ordeal.

~

Well, Dana got jumped, which we all expected. Do you think it was Marceline? Will Dana having a bodyguard actually help? Most importantly, LOOK AT OUR PRECIOUS BEAN, HE'S SO CUTE!

31. Will Dana Fight the Paparazzi?

Once again, there are articles galore about, "Matthew Jeneviere's Boyfriend Being Hospitalized!" Our campus exploded with chatter. Even Tori had some people running up to him since they thought the roommate of Matt's boyfriend would surely have answers. I kind of felt bad, until Tori reminded me how much he loves attention and he will happily become my spokesperson should I need one. He talked so much about dumb, pointless shit that people left him be, which is so Tori-like that it almost hurts. Glad to know someone can make the situation into something enjoyable.

Mom left after staying a week, which was more necessary than I thought. It was a pain to move around so I have needed some help now and again. And now I've got a bodyguard so she doesn't have to worry as much, a guy as intimidating as Joey, named Brandon. Mom approved as soon as he agreed to have a Disney movie marathon with us at the hotel and he cried during the Lion King. Ok, so I approved too. Doesn't matter how much I've seen it, I still cry.

Since I've got Brandon, I always have someone to escort me to and from class. In the afternoons I spent time with Mom and Matt, who both babied me. That definitely scored Matt more brownie points with my mom. When she left, she expressed that "her future son in law" had to come visit over summer break. Matt was very pleased with that title while I couldn't look at him without blushing for the next 48 hours. I guess that isn't much different than usual, though.

Unfortunately, the cops have searched and only come up with a few glimpses of the assailants. As expected, there were more than one. They managed to see a group of four hooded people rushing out of the alleyway caught on the security camera of the drug store. Other than that, there hasn't been any news, which has made Matt pretty irritable.

"If I can find a way to prove that it was my mom then they could at least do something," he mutters over dinner, nibbling on a piece of pizza. We're

sitting together on the couch at his apartment. The TV is quietly playing in the background.

"If it really was your mom then I doubt she will make it easy to find out. I've got Brandon now so everything will be fine."

"You're too optimistic."

"You're too pessimistic."

Matt pouts. "Can you blame me? What would have happened if someone hadn't caught them hurting you?"

I've been trying not to think about that.

"But I guess since we don't have proof then we have to assume it may not have been my mom," Matt mutters, cleaning off his hands. "It could have actually just been some crazy stalkers."

"True. That'd be even harder to prove since we have no idea who they could be."

Matt scratches at his thumb nail, a nervous tick that I haven't seen in a while. He glances at me from the corner of his eye then averts his gaze.

"What?" I ask, sensing he wants to speak.

He hesitates to respond, gnawing at his bottom lip until he mutters, "If it was so-called fans that did it, maybe... maybe it'd be best if we weren't so public?"

"W-What do you mean?"

"Go back to eating alone at the library. Not seeing each other as much on campus, stuff like that."

"How w-would that help?" I ask, feeling an ache forming in my chest. Matt is quick to take my hand, as if he senses my discomfort. No, not as if, he

has to. I'm not bothering to try and hide how that single suggestion hurt because I don't want that. I don't want that at all.

"I don't know if it'll help, but we have to try something," he says.

"But that's... it's not f-fair that we h-have to distance ourselves f-for the sake of others."

"It's for *your* sake," he argues. "Dana, they could have killed you."

"I've got Brandon--"

"What if it's a group again? What if it's an even bigger one? Brandon is a deterrent, but that doesn't mean he's unbeatable."

While I understand Matt's concern, and it isn't like I'm not concerned either, this doesn't sit well with me. I don't think avoiding each other will help. The fact remains that these people, whether they were hired by Marceline or came on their own accord, dislike that we are together. Whether we're actually seen together or not doesn't change anything.

However, when I'm about to argue, I catch Matt's quivering gaze and can practically taste his fear. His hands are shaking, as if trying to plead without words, so I end up agreeing; "Ok, i-if you think it will help, w-we can try."

Sighing in relief, Matt pulls me in for a hug. "Thanks, Dana."

~~~~~~

I really don't like this "not so public" deal. Matt doesn't walk with me to my first class. We separate at the parking lot to go our own ways. While we text throughout the day, I don't see him until lunch, then our conflicting schedules lead to little time spent together after class. Either I have work or he does, then there's of course school. If he happens to have time off or I do, we may end up being in the same room, but we're busy with class work so it's almost like a study hall.

I miss him. I miss holding hands on campus. I miss cuddling on the couch. I miss going on dates. And as the days continue on like this, I begin to
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wonder if he misses me too. Doesn't this bother him?

When I start to think like that, I grab the jar of cheesy confessions to read over. From something as ridiculously cheesy as, *"You're beautiful,"* to the very first one I ever read, " *When you're gone, all I can think about is when I'll see you again."* These are meant to make me feel better, but when I read that one in particular I can't help but to ask, *does he really feel that way?* Because right now, it sure as hell doesn't feel like it.

"You've been spending an awful lot of time here," Tori announces when he returns to our dorm, kicking off his shoes before he practically melts into his desk chair.

"Bad day?" I ask.

"Chelsea and I fought about summer break. She wants me to go visit her family, but did you know that they're lawyers?" He stares at me with eyes of utter horror. "Like big lawyers, like got their own firm lawyers. What the hell are they gonna think of the guy dating their daughter who were only sex friends for, like, two months?"

"Did they know you two were only sex friends?"

"Well, no, but they're lawyers, Dana! I bet they can get the truth out of me."

"I bet you will spill the truth on your own."

Tori places a hand over his heart. "That hurts."

"Because it's true?"

"Yeah."

"So, you fought since you don't want to go?" I ask.

"It's not that I don't want to," he grumbles. "I don't want to embarrass her."

"I get that." I felt that way, still feel that way sometimes about Matt. I want to be someone he can stand beside proudly... and maybe that's another

reason I don't like this so-called deal.

"I think you should go. It'd make you both really happy, I'm sure of it," I tell him.

Tori shrugs, clearly still thinking over it. Then he gives me a swift once over, "What's up with you?"

I set aside the jar that, thankfully, Tori has never investigated. Even he has his boundaries.

"Matt basically wants us to be on the down low since there's a chance the ones that jumped me may be crazy stalkers. He thinks it'll help keep them at bay, I guess," I mumble, staring up at the ceiling with my hands tapping against my stomach.

"And you agreed?"

"Yeah."

"But you're not happy about it?"

"Not at all."

"Then why did you agree?"

"Because he was so upset," I groan, recalling the look of desperation on his face. "And because I don't have any better suggestions."

"Maybe he just needs some reassurance," Tori suggests.

"You think so?"

He shrugs. "I can't imagine the position you two are in, but if something happened to Chelsea, I think I'd be pretty damn paranoid for a while."

That's true. If the roles were reversed and Matt was the one who was hurt, how would I react? I don't even want to think about it.

"When nothing happens, he'll feel better and you can go back to normal," Tori adds, sending me a reassuring smile.

"I hope so," I mumble, but I should have known better. Hope rarely works out for people.

New rumors have started. I've never thought of myself as an angry person. I have always shied away from confrontation, but if I ever meet the people writing these articles, I may scream at them. Once again, I'm viewing articles and hearing stories spread across campus that Matt and I have broken up. Since we haven't been seen together in public as much, and after what happened, people are saying that I couldn't handle it or that Matt was tired of all the drama so we're over.

I'm not sure if I'm angry or grateful that Matt isn't at school today. The shoot for his drama is finishing up soon so he's been extra busy. I actually haven't seen him in two days, which doesn't help quell these new rumors. And to accompany all these articles are photographs of Matt and his co-star on set. I wish I had the confidence to say that the comments don't bother me, but they do.

So many people are expressing how cute of a couple they are, how their chemistry is off the charts. They're getting so much support while I got almost nothing but hate. Why? Because I'm not a celebrity? Because I'm not even average? Accompany this with the fact that I've seen so little of Matt lately, I'm really not feeling that great. I want to curl up into a ball and cry for a couple of hours, at least.

My tipping point comes from someone I didn't expect; Marceline. I stop dead in my tracks on the way to the cafeteria while torturing myself by scrolling on twitter. When I see a stupid article recently dropped where they interview her and she dares to directly state the rumors are true, I break. I spin on my heel and return to my dorm where I do exactly what I've wanted all day; curl up into a ball and cry, either from sorrow or frustration, I'm not entirely sure.

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Aw, poor Dana D= He can't catch a break! Is it a good idea for the boys to avoid each other in public? How will Matt react to learning Marceline said they broke up in an interview? Will Dana tell Matt how he's feeling?

32. STUPID STALKER, YOU RUINS IT!

What am I meant to do?

Matt wants to keep us on the downlow because he's concerned, rightfully so. But I don't believe this is helping, and I definitely don't like hiding our relationship. We went through this before, where I was too nervous to reveal us, where I lacked confidence (I still do from time to time,) but now is different. Now I want to be open and honest. I want us together as often as we can be. What's the point of being in a relationship when we don't get to be a couple? If I try to bring this up, will Matt even listen?

I'm not sure if I'm sad or angry. Suppose I am sad *and* angry, which aren't emotions that I like being tied together. They're complicated enough on their own.

My phone rings. It's Matt. And I see that he has sent a few text messages prior.

Matt: Don't worry about the articles or the stupid comments

Matt: My mom is spewing bullshit. She's doing it on purpose

Matt: Where are you? The shoot finished up early so I'm on my way over

Matt: Dana, are you ok?

Me: I'm fine. I'm at my dorm.

I feel like a jerk for not answering his call and giving that half ass response. He'll call Brandon to check in, though. I'm not in the mood to talk or hear him say that this is for my safety. This is beginning to feel like a prison of our own making. We can break out as easily as we shoved ourselves in, but Matt's going to try to convince me to remain here. I wish I could ignore the

articles and the comments, but that's a lot easier said than done. They hurt simply by being there, simply knowing they are rampant right now. And of course my own thoughts don't help, the ones silently agreeing with them. Matt and his co-star do look good together. I wish such thoughts left me completely.

It's not surprising that soon after there's a knock at my door. I can take a guess of who it is, but I still call out, just to be safe, "Who is it?"

"It's me," Matt replies.

I roll out of bed while pressing my palms against my cheeks, hoping that my eyes aren't too swollen from the earlier tears. But they must be obvious since the moment I open the door, Matt's already solemn expression worsens. His hands tremble at his sides. I step aside, letting him enter. He's hesitant to do so, standing by the door afterwards like he doesn't think he's welcome.

"Aren't you going to sit?" I ask, plopping down on my bed while patting the spot next to me. That works since he comes waddling over like a child that thinks they're about to get scolded.

When Matt sits, we fall into tense silence, one that I'm not sure I can break. The only thoughts I'm having will likely worsen it. I can't stop picking at the end of my shirt or twisting the sheets around my finger. I'm being fidgety because there's a lot I want to say, so much complaining that I worry my tongue will fall off during the rant.

"I'm sorry that this is happening again, Dana. I'm sorry that you have to put up with this because of me. I don't know what to do, or what to say. She's trying to upset you," Matt whispers with his head lowered. Seems we're both similar right now; sad *and* angry. "She's doing what she can, trying to put on the pressure, trying to make you break and... and I get it if..."

"If what?" I ask.

"If you... can't stand this anymore."

"You're right, I can't stand it anymore," I mumble. Matt flinches. He digs his fingers into his pants, about to tear through them until I add, "I can't stand spending less time with you."

He raises his gaze, wide-eyed, fixated on me.

I try to keep my voice level, but it shakes as violently as my body does when I say, "I-I can't stand hiding. I can't stand "being on the down low" for a bunch of jackasses that are going to be pissed regardless of whether or not they see us in public! I can't stand being told this is for my safety when all it does is make me sad and infuriated and annoyed! If this is safe then I don't want it!"

Matt blinks rapidly, sitting frozen in place.

"All the comments online bother me. Honestly, they probably always will! But w-what helps me through them is spending time with you. How the hell am I meant to feel better when I hardly see you? What's the point of being together if we're never together?! I-I don't mind if you're busy. I'm proud and happy that you're working again, but here, at school, I want to hold your hand. I want us to walk together. I want us to spend time together, or is that not what you want?"

"Of course that's what I want," he answers when reaching for my hand. "I never meant to make you feel like I didn't."

"Well I do!"

Matt bites his lip.

"And-and-and you!" I point accusingly, causing him to actually squeak in surprise. "Stop apologizing like it's your fault! You know that it's not. This is a bunch of assholes being assholes and Marceline trying to mess with us. It isn't your fault. I worried about what would come from us dating before, but I've made my decision to be with you because I love you and that isn't going to change!"

Matt's jaw drops. His cheeks darken fiery red. He smacks his lips together then squeezes my hand when he whispers, "Can you repeat that?"

"Repeat what?"

"The last thing you said."

"I made my decision?"

"After that."

I rub the back of my neck, trying to recall my outburst word for word. "I worried about what would come... from us dating before, but I've made my decision to be with you because I lo--" The words catch in my throat, realization settling in. Now it's my turn to blush cherry red.

"You love me?" he asks, leaning in so that his words are whispered against my ringing ears.

While the admission was accidental, that certainly doesn't mean it isn't true. I could deny it, but then I'd be lying. I could admit it, but my heart is on the verge of bursting into a bajillion pieces.

When I face Matt, he's watching me with a patient blue gaze and my answer comes on a quiet breath, "Y-Yeah... I love you."

He smiles that dangerous eye smile, the one that always has my heart skipping a beat, or a few. Then he rests his hands against my cheeks, cradling my face in his grasp. He leans in, brushing his lips against mine then pressing a kiss to my cheek and my temple and my lips again like he can't get enough. I'm certainly not complaining, especially when he rests his forehead against mine and says, "I love you too, Dana."

Matt kisses me. His words sink in, allowing a moment of reprieve from the troubling thoughts earlier.

He loves me? *Me?* The nobody that accidentally spilled food on his shirt? What is this, a romantic comedy?! If it is, I hope I don't wake up, especially when Matt pulls me into a hug. He laughs, something that sounds like relief

and hope. Hope for a better tomorrow, maybe, or hope that these emotions continue between us for a long time.

"I'm sorry that I riled you up so much that you actually yelled," he says a few moments later. "I knew everything was bothering you, just like it was me, but I hoped we would find the perpetrators and it'd calm down. I don't want to make you wait and feel even worse, though."

"So... no more keeping us on the down low?" I mumble into his shoulder.

"No more."

"You won't be too worried, will you?"

"I don't know," he answers, pressing another kiss against the nape of my neck. It sends a shiver down my spine. "I just don't want you to be this upset, especially now."

Right, Marceline, I almost forgot about her.

The thought of Marceline is put on hold when there's a loud bang outside the door followed by someone shouting. Matt is quick to stand when Brandon's voice mixes in with the shouting.

"Stay there," Matt orders, but I'm right behind him when heading for the door. "Dana," he insists.

To keep him happy, I stay a few steps back. Matt hesitantly opens the door. There's a commotion in the hall. Students are starting to gather, also peering outside of their rooms. I can only make out someone being held down by Brandon and what I think is a picture frame on the floor.

"What's going on?" I ask, trying to peer past Matt.

Matt leans down to pick up the picture frame, frowning when he sees whatever it is.

"Call campus security," Brandon orders, still holding the now cursing and squirming person down.

"I haven't done anything!" the stranger shouts.

"I've seen this guy sneaking around the dorms then he tried to leave that outside the door." Brandon nods his head to the picture in Matt's grasp.

"What is it?" I ask, stepping closer to inspect. Matt tries to shield it from my view, but it's too late. I see that it's a picture of me with my eyes scratched out "DIE" written across the photo in red.

Matt quickly pushes me back inside. "Can you handle him?" he asks Brandon.

Brandon gives him a look that somehow says, *"does this scrawny piece of shit look like he can push me off?"*

Matt hums then shuts the door, making sure to put the picture face down. Honestly, it doesn't bother me as much as I thought it would, maybe because I know Brandon tackled the guy for it.

The next few moments are utter chaos. Campus security is called to take the guy away. When I finally get a look at his face, he's somehow familiar. I know I've seen him somewhere before, and Brandon is insistent that he's seen him around the dorms, but his student ID doesn't match anyone living here. The cops get involved too since they get suspicious that he had something to do with the attack. When all is finally said and done, I end up going to Matt's apartment to stay while the cops try to figure everything out.

"Ruined the moment," Matt mutters under his breath, unaware of me returning from the kitchen with something to drink. He's sitting on the edge of the bed, eyes downcast.

"Ruined what moment?" I ask.

Matt raises his gaze. "Huh?"

"You were talking to yourself."

"Oh... nothing." He shrugs.

"Let's hope this guy is the culprit," I say, handing a drink to Matt. "That way this can be done and over with."

"For now," he grumbles, setting his drink aside then mine when I hand it to him.

"Don't say that. It'll get better."

"Where does your optimism come from?" he asks.

I shrug, moving around the room to my bag to find some clothes to sleep in. When I'm grabbing a pair, Matt suddenly says, "Next semester you shouldn't live in the dorms."

"Where else can I stay?" I hum. "I can't afford a place working a part time job."

"You can stay with me," he replies, blushing. I stare at him for a good five minutes before he finally looks up to ask, "You don't want to?"

"I-I never s-said that."

"Then you do want to?"

I grin. "I never said that either."

He rolls his eyes then holds out a hand, one that I take immediately. He pulls me into his lap, snuggling into my back.

"You should definitely stay here with me next semester," he whispers. "I'll cuddle with you every night and make you breakfast every morning. I'll drive you to and from work everyday and I'll tell you I love you at least three times a day."

"Three?" I laugh. "Breakfast, lunch, and dinner?"

"Mhm."

"What about dessert?"

"I'll show you how much I love you."

"H-How will you do t-that?"

Matt smirks and quickly convinces me that living with him next semester would be both a very good and very dangerous idea.

~

Aw, yay, the love admission! And agreement to live together next semester, how domestic xD I hope you enjoyed this fluffy chapter, mostly fluffy anyway hehe! Heads up, next chapter is the last so start thinking of questions for the Q&A! Happy Holidays! ^_^

The End

"I can't believe she had nothing to do with it," Matt says after our update from the police.

"Yeah, I was thinking it would be some huge plot where she put a hit on me," I admit. "I guess we've been watching too much TV, or you've been *starring* in too much TV."

Matt does not laugh at my poor attempt at a joke, but I did!

"Guess so," he mumbles, falling back onto the couch to sit with me.

The cops did their investigation and discovered the group really was made up of some of Matt's crazy stalkers. Four had been a part of the assault, two of which came from *out of state,* so that was shocking to hear. It was more shocking to learn that Marceline had nothing to do with it...and maybe a bit disappointing. Would have been kind of neat if this event led to the discovery of some underground ring of rich people hiring hit men, but I guess the universe decided we had enough crazy in our life already.

The guy gave up his friends pretty quick once charges were threatened. Now he's apparently in tears knowing that those charges will remain. Matt is adamant that we make sure people know what happens when they cross the line. I wasn't sure at first since I'd like to have a bit less pressure, but, in the long run, pressing charges could deter future issues so I'll deal with it.

Marceline still caused trouble with that stupid interview, but Matt has reassured me that he will set things straight. He'll call her out on her bullshit, to an extent seeing as it really is no one's god damn business what our relationship is like. Matt also isn't obligated to share his entire life story to the world, and I sure as hell will never ask him to do such a thing, especially when his mental health is involved. We'll do what we can that will help the both of us. One way of doing that is being open about our relationship again at school.

"I should call Mom and tell her about the good news," I say when reaching for my phone. "She'll be relieved to know that the perps have been caught, and you may get some more brownie points with my parents."

"Good, I need them." Matt smiles when resting his head against my shoulder. "Especially when you try to convince them to let you live with me next semester."

"Don't you mean we?"

"How can I convince them?"

"Mom likes you, and Dad will too once he gets to know you."

"I don't know if they'll like me as much as I steal you away."

I roll my eyes. "It's not stealing if I'm coming willingly."

Matt chuckles.

"It may help convince them if you were to come in person," I suggest, grinning at Matt's wide-eyed expression. "You could come stay for a bit over summer vacation... i-if you want."

"You don't think your family would mind?" he asks.

"I think you would mind more. Once Bridget gets a hold of you, she'll probably have you sign stuff to sell online, maybe even request a mini photoshoot."

Matt snorts.

"Then Mom and Dad will probably walk you through memory lane--"

"Sounds great."

"Sounds like torture."

Matt shrugs, grinning at me when he says, "You suggested it."

"So you're agreeing? You'll come visit over summer vacation?"

His cheeks tint light pink when he nods. "Yeah, I'd like that."

"M-Me too."

Before the moment makes me completely forget what I wanted to do, I wave my phone, signaling I'll be calling my mom. Matt nods then rests his head on my shoulder again, going quiet while I tell Mom the good news. As expected, she's relieved. I think I hear Bridget shouting about convincing Matt to sell our love story to a movie studio in the background. Leave it to her to try and make a profit off my life.

"Are you ready to go back to school tomorrow, then?" Matt asks after the phone call.

"Yeah, are you?"

He nods, holding out his hand for me to take. The moment our fingers intertwine, he brings them up to press his lips against the back of my hand then cradles it in his lap. "Sorry that everything is always so hectic with me."

"At least we're never bored."

"That is the best way to think of it." Matt laughs. "Maybe after we graduate we should travel the world for a few months, disappear off the radar, drink wine and eat a lot of cheese."

"That's oddly specific," I say.

"Isn't that what really rich people do?"

"How would I know? You're the rich person." I laugh. "Although that sounds like what *old* rich people do, honestly."

"Then we'll do that when we're old," he says, smirking when my face heats up at the realization of what that implies.

"You think we'll be together even when we're old?"

"Definitely."

"Where does *your* optimism come from?" I tease, blushing even more when he sits up to plant a kiss on my cheek.

"Learned it from you, I suppose," he answers when placing another kiss.

"Let's hope that optimism remains for tomorrow."

"I think it will as long as you stay the night again."

I purse my lips, trying not to smile at Matt's exaggerated fake innocence, completed with rapid blinking of his lashes.

"You don't need to try to convince me to stay. I didn't plan on leaving," I mutter, wishing that my face would stop heating up every time Matt comes close, but alas, no such thing happens. The moment he's hugging me and kissing all over my neck, I'm on the verge of bursting into a ball of flames. Not that he ever seems to mind.

Ok, I don't really mind either.

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When we return to school, we do so hand in hand for everyone to see. Some stare, some whisper, some don't care if they're heard, but right now, I don't care much about hearing them. I look up at Matt and smile, merely happy that we're in this together for real. No more hiding. No more running away. The two of us being open and honest. There's no guarantee there won't be issues in the future, but that's life for everyone. We can't expect smooth sailing all the time. There will always be a storm, but it will be sunny again once it passes. This is no different.

It isn't always easy to ignore the stares throughout the school day. Sometimes I'm sitting in class and I have this feeling that someone is watching. Normally there is someone, a fellow classmate that smiles sheepishly when caught or one that swiftly pretends they weren't burning
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holes into the back of my head. But this, too, will pass. Something crazier will happen. Something in their lives will take precedence over the celebrity at their school dating someone like me. Time will pass and our story will fade. We'll become expected, and therefore normal, which is a bit of an odd thought.

I did come to college hoping to make new friends and change myself as a person. Become a new Dana! But this definitely isn't what I had in mind. I thought I'd go to a few parties, get myself a boyfriend, go out and try new things, and while that certainly has happened, it's been much more... extreme. But I wouldn't change it, not even the bad because the bad moments are what make me appreciate the good moments even more. I guess I should really give myself a pat on the back for making it so far. It's hard to say, hard to admit, but I have done a good job and, most importantly, *I am proud of myself.*

"I'm relieved to find you with a big grin on your face," Matt says when picking me up to go to lunch.

I take his hand. "Were you worried?"

"Yeah. I was thinking of all the possible ways I could ask Joey and Brandon to torment anyone that was bothering you."

"I am a bodyguard, not a torturer," Joey comments, grinning when we both glance back at him, then chuckling when he adds, "But I suppose I could make an exception."

Brandon looks like he's questioning why he took up such a weird job offer. I don't really blame him for it either.

"Nothing has happened other than a few people staring," I say, hopefully to reassure Matt. He's stressed enough as is, no need to add more. "Maybe you charging those jerks have made others realize that they shouldn't mess with you."

Matt nods. "I do have a lot of money that could cause them a lot of trouble."

"I don't think you should brag about being in a high position of power."

"Well, I don't think they have the right to torment us simply because I'm in a high position of power," he remarks, pouting while doing so.

"No argument there."

"Obviously, that's the first reason I was interested in you."

I raise a brow at that. "What do you mean?"

"When you tried to give me money," he explains just as we step into the cafeteria. "I liked that you respected me, if that makes sense? Yeah, I have the money, but you apologized for the accident and wanted to do what you thought was right, just as you would have done to someone who didn't have the money. You treated me like you would have treated everyone else. I was really happy."

As sweet as that is, I can't help but to ask, "Matt, did I ever tell you that you have really low standards?"

"I don't think you give yourself the credit that you deserve," he argues moments before Tori shows up.

"Look what we have here!" Tori calls, circling us with Chelsea, who is very reluctant, but Tori has hold of her hand so she has to circle us too. "The campus' hottest couple has arrived, and I am referring to myself and Chelsea, of course. You two can take second."

I roll my eyes while Matt shifts his weight from one foot to the other. He isn't used to Tori, but something tells me that will change.

"Leave them be," Chelsea says, attempting to drag the always nosy Tori away. "They have enough attention already. They don't need you pointing it out even more."

"But my attention is better than the attention of anyone else. They should be honored."

"Oh yes, absolutely honored, thrilled to be noticed by the gossip whore."

"Don't gossip shame me."

Chelsea drags Tori away, who shouts about us coming to sit with them once we get our food.

I glance at Matt to ask, "Do you want to do that?"

"Do what?" he asks.

"Sit with Tori, Chelsea, and Rose," I answer, gesturing to the table where Rose is already sitting with her food. Chelsea and Tori are ordering lunch from one of the shops nearby. "We don't have to if you don't want to," I add. "Just thought it'd be a good idea to eat here... together."

"At the scene of the crime," Matt hums, grinning when I pout.

"I tripped on accident. There was no crime."

"I consider it a crime."

"I offered to pay you back."

"Not the shirt," he says when leaning in. "For stealing my heart."

He didn't...

"...you really have been in too many drama's," I say.

"Judging by how red you are, I think you secretly like it."

"I plead the fifth."

Laughing, Matt pulls me in for a kiss in the very place where our story began, and arguably, where our next chapter begins. We may not know our ending, but I can say that I've loved the journey so far, and I'm confident I'll love it even more as it's written.

THE END

Readers: I can't wait for Marceline to get what she deserves! Me: *the author that started and wrote this story with absolutely no plans and continued to have no plans even after introducing Marceline* Hahahahaha... yeah... about that... uuuuuhhhh... my bad~

But in all seriousness, there ya go, it's the end! Our boys are open about their relationship again. Dana's attackers were caught and will get in trouble. Matt will eventually meet his parents and maybe they'll move in together next semester, yay, love all around! I admit that I'm glad this is over since it was fun not having a plan for a while, but the last, like, seven chapters have been incredibly stressful >.> which may have to do with my other projects, but I'm not entirely sure. This was meant to be another shits and giggles story, not something I plan to really do anything with other than post and hope y'all enjoy it. The Q&A is posted. If you have questions, read that first because it probably answers them.

Q&A

Will there be a sequel?

Nope.

Can we have an epilogue to show a few years later?

Nah, I don't wanna write one lol

Will there be a spin off about Brandon and Joey?

No.

What do they struggle with the most mentally? But not related to what's happening now like something they've struggled with their whole life?

Never thought about it, but I guess Matt's would always be his relationship with his mom. As expressed in the story, he's been struggling with her controlling him his whole life so being controlled by anyone in general would make him upset.

Dana's would probably be... how people perceive him? Since he mentioned early on that he was teased for his looks, then it was made worse by the attention from dating Matt. It'll probably always bother him a little even when he's older.

Where do you see Matt and Dana in 1 yr? 2 yrs? 5 yrs?

Still dating lol I think after all the crap they went through, they're a couple that'll stick together. They'd probably get married around 10 years? Both seem the type to really wait it out before popping the question.

Does Matt's acting career take off again?

Yeah, I think he'd get even more popular without his mom hovering over him since he can choose what he's genuinely interested in.

Does Dana and Tori remain friends after college?

Yeah, but I not as friendly as they were. Life moves on. They'll have their own careers and families, but they'd probably at least hang out from time to time.

Does Matt ever patch things up with his Mom?

No. I don't think what she has done to him is forgivable and Matt sure as hell doesn't either. Mom is a title that is earned, not given, and she has never earned that so they're definitely done.

What inspires your writing? Real life events? Characters you love? Developing a twisty plot?

A little bit of everything. For Fools in Love, I watched the kdrama I Am Gangnam Beauty (highly recommend btw, very cute and beautiful story) and the couple was sooooo adorably awkward that I wanted to have two fools in love too, which is obviously where the name came from. And I wanted it to be ridiculous kdrama stuff, like the whole dating an actor thing, having to have a bodyguard, all that.

I'd say what really makes me love a story, and why I love my fantasy story He Who Will Be King, the most would be the developing a twisty plot and/or having characters I genuinely love. I'm not the type to get super attached to the point that I think OH I GOTTA WRITE MORE or I WANT TO READ EVERYTHING I CAN ABOUT THEM! I'm more of the *"ok, give me the story, move the plot forward, and when it ends, it ends, and I move onto the next"* type of person. So when I find a story and characters that actually make me invested, they mean a lot to me.

What's the written work you're most proud of right now?

As mentioned above, He Who Will Be King. I want to make it even better in the future ^^

When do you find time to write and post here?

I work from home writing full time so...it's already my life lol I have been getting more work projects lately so I have to cut back on the free novels. I hope I can continue giving free work through the year for everyone to enjoy, but I'm definitely needing to take more time for myself now.

Anyway, that's all the questions I got for the Q&A. Sorry that it took so long to post it. With the holiday and the break I took, I kind of forgot lol I have plenty of other novels available to read, as well as some stories only available on Tapas. You can find them by searching my name; Twoony. Thanks for reading!

Completed Free to Read Novels:

The Secrets of Lore Seymour
Invisible Boy
What Makes a Monster
Dear Caleb
Fools in Love
-K
14 Days
The Lonely Ones

Completed Paid Novels Available on Tapas:

Speak the Truth
Riddle Me This
Whisper Woods
The Not So Super Hero
The Antidote to Doubt
Save the Demon King
Reborn as the Villain's Lackey
The Matchmaker Prince

Completed Comic Available on Tapas:

Love Algorithm
Speak the Truth (partial adaptation of novel)

Books available on Amazon as eBooks and paperbacks:

Speak the Truth
The Not So Super Hero
Whisper Woods

Check Out My Other Novel!

"Everyone knows not to stray into the Grim Woods. If you do, the fair ones will take you.

Artemis Redbrook, a lonely hunter, makes a deal with a fair one to hunt those fearsome woods when his village is dying of hunger and the future looks bleak. He knew what monsters lurked within the woods and prepared himself for the battles to come, but he never expected to stumble across a sleeping prince. Let alone fall for him.

A love between a human and fae, could it spell the end or a new beginning?"

My newest free to read novel, The Lonely Ones, is my attempt at writing about fae (but make it gay!) A romantic fantasy with a little spooks. It'll have some dark themes, but the story won't be all doom and gloom. I'll also have warnings on chapters to let readers know. But seriously, I promise there will be ridiculously adorable moments, just as there were in this.

The Lonely Ones is complete. I've left an external link or you can just go to my profile and it's at the top of my page. Please check it out, I'd really appreciate it and, if you do, I hope you enjoy!!

I've got plenty of other completed free to read content too:

Pictures of Us
What Makes a Monster
-K
Invisible Boy
14 Days
Dear Caleb

And one on-going free to read story:

The Secrets of Lore Seymour